The Quick & Easy guide from Consumer Reports®

SHOPSMART;)

July 2008 SM

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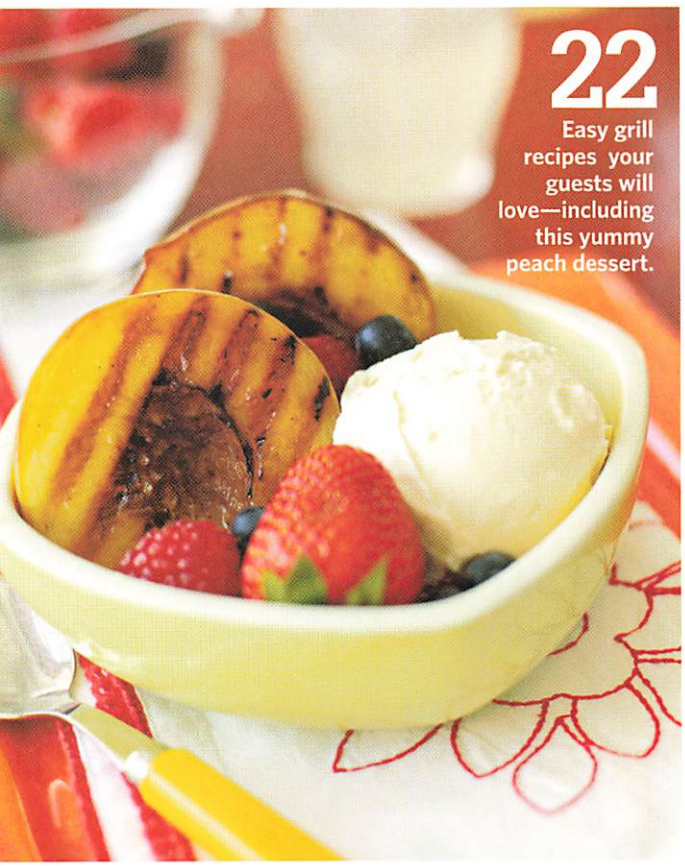

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On the cover Photograph by Monica Buck; Stylist: Martha Bernabe For shopping details, see inside back cover.

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the SHOPSMART;) edge Buy the best

The Quick & Easy guide from Consumer Reports
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Get the hottest stoves, countertops, fridges, blenders, and more for less
Don't fall for these supermarket rip-offs
Great sites for freebies
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without spending a fortune

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So if our expert testers say a product isn't worth your money, we'll tell you so. And when we recommend a product, you never have to wonder if that's because the manufacturer is paying us for advertising or handing us freebies. We spend millions of dollars a year to buy the hundreds of items tested in our labs. And we purchase them

Free money!

I feel bad about my new bag. Don't get me wrong, it's exactly what I wanted. But when I asked the store manager very nicely for a price break—after all, I was buying an armload of other stuff—she wouldn't budge. I gave it one more shot. After a brief but uncomfortable pause, she blew me off again. I just had to have that bag, so I shuffled over to the register in defeat. Drat!

The problem with haggling is that sometimes you feel like a real dork standing there in front of an uncooperative salesperson. But when one of them takes the bait—oh, what a wonderful feeling! It's like finding money on the ground. And I've had plenty of success over the years.

Sometimes bargaining is so easy you barely have to do anything to nab a discount. Once, when I was in an electronics store, I got a nice break on speakers by simply flashing a list of prices printed out from the Internet. Another time, while scavenging the shoe sale racks at a department store, I asked a salesman if he would shave off another 15 percent if I bought three pairs. He not only said yes, at the register he applied the extra discount to a blouse as well.

The point is, if you don't ask, you don't get. Sure, asking for a better deal can make you squirm, but those times when it works more than make up for any fleeting discomfort. At the very least, when your negotiating efforts fall flat, as they did in my recent bag situation, you have the satisfaction of knowing that you got the best deal you could (assuming, of course, that you did some shopping around!). For more haggling success stories and tips from experts and readers, check out page 30.

Lisa Lee Freeman
Editor in Chief

in the NEXT ISSUE Great organizing tips and products for the back-to-work-and-school season. Look for us on newsstands on July 15.

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Designer duds on the cheap

How to get in on sample sales and save big bucks on clothes and accessories

Sorry, but you're not going to score the really great deals on designer clothes at a mall or even at outlet centers. The biggest bargains are at sample sales, where designers sell their outrageously priced goods for up to 75 percent off.

New York is the sample-sale capital, but if you don't live near there you can still get in on the action. Sample sales aren't the exclusive little outlets they used to be. In the past, they offered the original line a designer developed and showed in his showroom, and then sold off at the end of the season. Nowadays, they include canceled orders and overstock, says Adam Bernhard, founder of HauteLook.com, a private- and sample-sale Web site. This explains how you can find a size 10 or 12 at these sales, not just traditional sample sizes made for models. So how can you tap into these bargain-clothing fests?

Take a trip to New York

Nearly every day of the week there's at least one sample sale in New York City. You can find listings in New York magazine or at *www.nymag.com* (click on Shopping), or try *www.topbutton.com*. The Chanel sale is one of the most coveted, but you'll also find sample sales for everything from gorgeous Marchesa gowns to comfortable Delman shoes. If you make it to a sample sale, here are a few tips: Wear a wide skirt or leggings and ballet flats. The shoes are easy to slip off and you can try on anything over leggings and under a flowy skirt. (Don't count on dressing rooms!) Be sure to ask for discounts on clothes with small but fixable defects like missing buttons.

ILLUSTRATION: STANLEY CHOW

Find local sales

Go to *www.dailycandy.com* or any sites that carry local sample-sale news; for example, Chicago sales are posted at *www.stylechicago.com*. Get on mailing lists and get to know the salespeople at stores you love—they'll be able to give you a heads-up about special events and sample sales. You may also be able to tap into multicity sample sales like those held by Billion Dollar Babes, one of the biggest sample-sale organizers. The company is also planning online sales. For more info, go to *www.billiondollarbabes.com*.

Visit an online sample sale

There aren't a lot of them yet, but they're growing. Be sure to get in early and don't dawdle—stock often runs out in about an hour. At *www.hautelook.com*, you have to become a member, and then you'll be sent an e-mail with sale times. Also try *www.ideeli.com*. You can use the code "ShopSmart" to enter until Aug. 30. And at *www.7thonsale.ebay.com* you can bid on clothing donated by designers from mid-November to mid-December. For every dollar raised, MAC cosmetics donates a dollar to the MAC AIDS Fund.

4 ways to shop smarter

We asked ShopSmart readers to share their tricks for saving big

Check out freebie forums. "I use shopping forums like Gottadeal.com to find deals. I have gotten all sorts of things, mostly sample sizes: cereal, detergent and softener, hair-care samples. I also got a free coffeemaker plus the coffee pods to go with it!"

—Jennifer Stover, Greensboro, NC

Avoid sale-pricing tricks. "I recently went to my grocery store and saw a 'buy one, get one free' deal for Kraft cheese. But the price of a block of cheese went from $2.69 to $3.79. So you're really not getting one free."

—Maria Madrigal, Houston

(P.S. Here's one more reason not to jump at "buy one, get one free" deals: We did the math and found that even when a store doesn't jack up the price before a sale, these may not be the deals you think they are. That's because although you may be thinking you're getting something for nothing, the discount on your total purchase is really 50 percent—or less if the second item is of lower value, because you have to pay for the first one. Ditto for signs that say "buy one, get 50% off the second one." Your brain may register 50 percent off, but the actual discount is 25 percent off.).

Ask for a discount. "I can't tell you how many times I have tried to negotiate a deal and it has worked. For clothing that is maybe a little dirty, I've been able to get 15 percent off. On furniture that might have a small scratch or dent, I've been able to get 40 perent off. My motto is, it never hurts to ask."

—Monique Mortensen, Salt Lake City

(For more on haggling, see page 30.)

Check eBay first. "When I was redoing my house, I never paid retail for anything. I like old light fixtures, so I invested a lot of time searching eBay. I paid half of what I would have paid in an antique store. I also bought a beautiful couch and chair on Craig's List."

—Sharalee Falzarano, North River, NY

NOW you know Did you ever wonder...

How many peanuts are in a jar of peanut butter?

the answer: **853** (in an 18-ounce jar)

How many oranges are in a carton of orange juice?

the answer: **24-32** (in a 64-ounce carton)

How many strawberries are in a jar of strawberry preserves?

the answer: **22** (in a 12-ounce jar)

How many apples are in a jar of applesauce?

the answer: **10** (in a 24-ounce jar)

WENDELL WEBBER; PROP STYLIST: JEFFSTYLES.COM

Cool coffee drinks

Which bottled and canned coffees give you the most refreshing caffeine hit?

Brewing a pot is a bit of a pain, especially when the weather is balmy and you plan to ice your drink afterward. Chilled premade coffee drinks make life easier, but how do they taste? To find out, our testers sipped four varieties in a blind taste test and crunched the nutritional numbers. All of them were pretty good, although one stood out from the crowd as a bit more tasty (not surprisingly, it was also the one with the highest fat count). All of them will give you a decent caffeine jolt—most are comparable to a regular cup of coffee. But they also have way more sugar than you probably add to your mug—as much as 4 to almost 13 teaspoons per serving. So you may not want to replace all your cups of coffee with these drinks. Nutrition stats below are per container. By the way, the Bolthouse lists more than one serving, although we'd have no trouble polishing the whole thing off. So we calculated calories per bottle or can.

espresso coffee drinks

Starbucks Doubleshot Espresso & Cream

Price per 6.5-fluid-ounce can $2.01
Calories per can 140
Fat 6 grams
Sugars 17 grams
Caffeine 121 milligrams
Tasters' notes Our top pick, this one has a nice balance of strong, sweet, brewed coffee flavor and a rich, creamy taste.

Caribou Coffee Iced Coffee Plus Espresso

Price per 12-fluid-ounce can $1.94
Calories per can 100
Fat 0.5 gram
Sugars 20 grams
Caffeine 159 milligrams
Tasters' notes This one has a sweet coffee flavor, with a hint of milk, but not the freshest coffee taste. It is also a bit watery.

mocha coffee drinks

Starbucks Frappuccino Mocha

Price per 9.5-fluid-ounce bottle $1.72
Calories per bottle 180
Fat 3 grams
Sugars 31 grams
Caffeine 93 milligrams
Tasters' notes It has a sweet, milky coffee taste with a hint of chocolate. And like the Starbucks and the Caribou at left, it has a hint of bitterness.

Bolthouse Farms Perfectly Protein Mocha Cappuccino

Price per 15.2-fluid-ounce bottle $2.59
Calories per bottle 338
Fat 5 grams
Sugars 53 grams
Caffeine 114 milligrams
Tasters' notes This sweet and thick concoction has a caramelized milky flavor and a hint of chocolate. Too bad it tastes like instant instead of brewed coffee.

TIP Making iced coffee at home? Avoid a watery brew by using leftover coffee frozen in ice-cube trays to cool a hot cup of joe.

SITES to see

Planning a party? Click here!

Whether you're throwing a shower or a casual get-together, there are Web sites that can help you design and send special invitations, find one-of-a-kind party supplies, and even get advice on guest lists and party themes. Here are a few of our favorite sites to help you plan your next shindig. They were screened by our Web experts to make sure they adhere to our customer-service and disclosure guidelines, but we did not test any of the products shown.

INVITATION HELP
invitationconsultants.com

Whether you're planning a wedding or a simple backyard barbecue, this site has the invitations. It even offers a convenient though pricey address, stuff, and mail service that's great for large orders.

Cool feature Check out the etiquette guide, where you'll find the answers to potentially thorny questions like how to list stepparents on wedding invitations. Also join online chats for one-on-one advice.

Price Invitations start at $1 per card, usually for packets of 25.

PARTY-GIVING ADVICE
monkeysee.com

Want to learn how to grill a steak to Morton's-like perfection in your own backyard? Or wrap a gift like a pro? Or maybe you want to create the perfect vodka cocktail. At *www.monkeysee.com,* chefs, event planners, and other experts will teach you on demand. Click on a category on the left side of the screen (such as Food & Drink) to learn how to arrange a guest list, organize a tailgate party, or decorate a cake.

Cool feature If you're more monkey "do" than "see," make your own how-to video and submit it.

Price Free.

KIDS' BIRTHDAYS
birthdayinabox.com

Running out of ideas for the 12-and-under set? You'll find more than a hundred party-theme ideas here, with recipes, crafts, game instructions, partyware, decorations, and more. Order a party box for eight and extra supplies for additional guests, and all the work is done for you. Each box includes theme-matching plates, napkins, and cups; a table cover; plastic utensils; balloons and streamers; and birthday candles. Another fun site for kids' party entertainment ideas and supplies is Pepperspollywogs.com, where you can even order a special little rhyme for invitations.

Cool feature The sale area at birthdayinabox.com has discounts on party supplies.

Price Depends on the theme, but expect to pay about $25 for a standard party box.

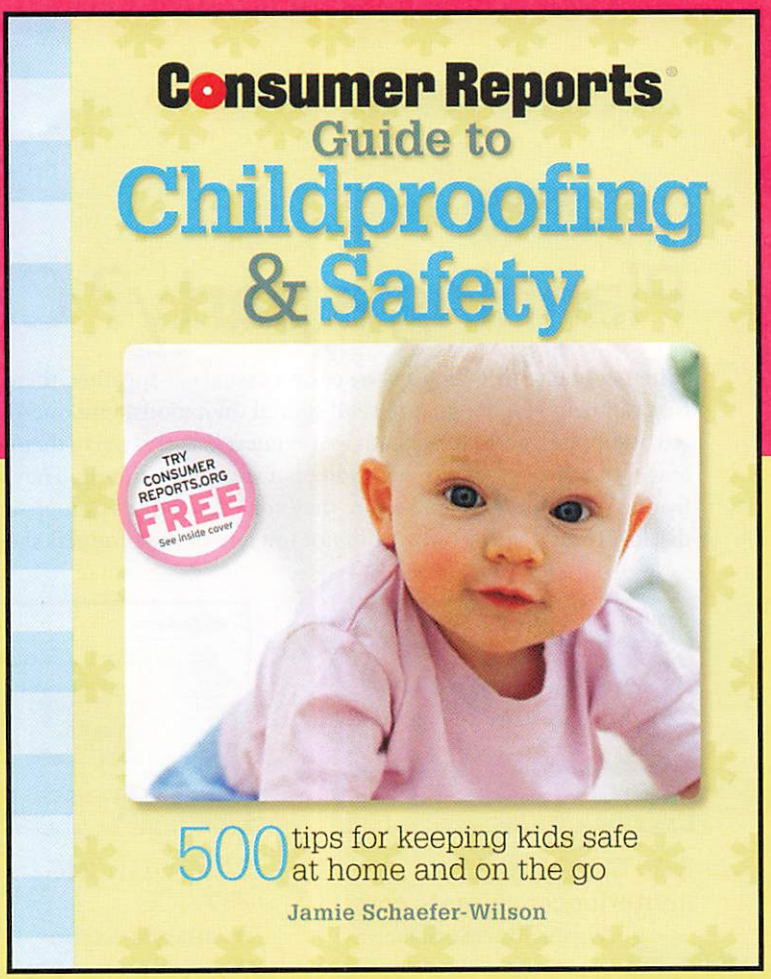
GENERAL PARTY SUPPORT
party411.com

Interested in throwing a luau or a Mardi Gras party? This site has hula skirts, masks, and everything else you'll need for that special evening. In addition to lots of great ideas for party themes and a large selection of decorations, the site sells games, banners, invitations, and other supplies. You can customize all kinds of items, like glasses, mugs, cameras, pens, candy wrappers, and bottle labels. You can even print a life-size cutout so you can have Elvis at the party.

Cool feature "Party Technicians," led by Party Girl (and CEO) Sherri Foxman, include the Corporate Consultant, Etiquette Queen, Game Girl, Invitation Diva, Fashion Queen, and Party Doctor. All answer your party questions personally.

Price Decorations and favors start at $1.

Keep Your Child Safe Both at Home & on the Go!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& Safety
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500 tips for keeping kids safe at home and on the go
Jamie Schaefer-Wilson

GUIDE TO CHILDPROOFING & SAFETY

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- Playground, beach, water safety and MORE.
- Clear advice for choosing the right car seat and illustrated instructions for proper installation.
- Special section on the hazards of LEAD and what you can do about them.

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ask SHOPSMART;)SM

Advice from our experts on cheap gas, cutting junk mail, and more

No-name gas stations

Q Is it OK to go with the cheapest gas? —*L.M., Chicago*

The gas at independent stations is often bought from the major oil companies, so it's generally the same quality you'd find at a brand-name station, says autos editor Rik Paul. Some companies use special additives, such as detergents that fight carbon buildup, in their own brand's gas. This allows them to advertise that their gas keeps an engine cleaner. But newer cars typically don't have carbon buildup problems. And if you have an older car, you can buy an engine treatment that says it dissolves carbon. But you should be fine going for the lowest-priced gas.

Top-loading washing machines

Q Are top-loading washing machines going to become obsolete? —*R.N., Sugar Land, TX*

Top-loaders still outsell front-loading washers and are generally more affordable, so they won't be going away any time soon, says Emilio Gonzalez, laundry-program leader. Front-loaders have generally performed better than top-loaders, especially when it comes to water and energy efficiency and gentleness on clothing, but top-loaders have been improving, especially high-efficiency models. Our top-rated models are front-loaders, but two top-loaders that we recommend are the General Electric WJRE5500G[WW] ($480) and the Estate ETW4400T[Q] ($400).

Mercury lightbulb risk

Q I've started to use energy-efficient lightbulbs, but I heard they contain mercury. Are they safe? —*A.H., New York*

Yes, but they do contain a small amount of mercury, so you need to take precautions if they break, says Ronni Sandroff, health editor. If a bulb pops, open a window and leave the room for at least 15 minutes to avoid exposure. Wear disposable gloves to pick up the broken pieces, using cardboard and a damp paper towel or sticky tape (using a vacuum on hard surfaces can spread mercury into the air). Put remnants in a double plastic bag, seal, and discard in the trash outdoors. For burned-out bulbs, go to *www.epa.gov/epaoswer/hazwaste/mercury/collect.htm* to find a local recycling center. As a last resort, put burned-out bulbs in two sealed bags outdoors.

Cutting out unwanted mail

Q What is the Web site to opt out of junk mail? —*F.D., via e-mail*

According to Urvashi Rangan, director of GreenerChoices.org, which, among other things, offers advice on reducing waste, the site to visit is *www.worldprivacyforum.org/toptenoptout.html.* It connects you with resources to opt out of many types of unwanted mail. It also has links to sites like the National Do Not Call Registry (*www.donotcall.gov* or 888-382-1222), which stops most telemarketing calls.

Long-distance Web calls

Q I would like to buy a Web camera for my mom in Florida so she can talk to her grandkids in Massachusetts. Any advice? —*L.E., Natick, MA*

Both locations will need a webcam (from $30 to $60), as well as video-conferencing software, says electronics editor Donna Tapellini. Most laptops now come with webcams, though most desktop monitors do not. To increase sound quality, you can buy a separate headset with a built-in microphone (they start at about $20). One free video-conferencing program to try is Skype *(www.skype.com)*, which lets you make free phone calls to other Skype users. For e-mail and video, try Sightspeed *(www.sightspeed.com)*. AOL Instant Messenger, Windows Live Messenger, and Yahoo Messenger also offer video chat.

Go ahead, ask away! E-mail us at *ShopSmartmag.org/questions.* Sorry, we can't answer every question, but give us a try. Letters may be edited for space and clarity.

our EXPERTS

Rik Paul
autos editor

Emilio Gonzalez
laundry-program leader

Ronni Sandroff
health editor

Urvashi Rangan
director of GreenerChoices.org

Donna Tapellini
electronics editor

New stuff we love

Our latest favorite things, from a super-sleek laptop to a generous cell-service plan

Apple of our eye

MACBOOK AIR Starts at $1,800

Why it's hot If you've seen the ad with this sexy laptop sliding out of an envelope, you might be wondering whether it's too skinny. Well, Apple dropped the weight without hurting the ergonomics. You get a bigger screen and a better keyboard than on smaller lightweight laptops. And the backlighted, angled keyboard makes typing a breeze. The Macbook Air won't replace your main workhorse computer. It has no internal optical drive, so you can't play CDs or DVDs; it can't be upgraded; and it has a minimal number of ports. But if you're tired of lugging around a heavy laptop, you won't find a better superportable at this price.

Where to get it Apple stores, *www.apple.com*

pizza pronto

KENMORE ELITE 8082[9] $630

Why it's hot It has lots of shortcut keys for favorite foods like pizza; convection cooking, which swirls hot air around to ensure crisp (not the usual microwave-soggy) pizza crusts; and a sensor that automatically shuts off the oven when food is done. And if you're into microwave cooking, you'll love this feature: Its tray slides from side to side instead of turning so those oblong casserole dishes won't crash into the oven's walls.

Where to get it Sears

big talk

SPRINT 'SIMPLY EVERYTHING' UNLIMITED CALLING PLAN

$99.99 a month

Why it's hot The plan includes unlimited text, picture, and video messaging. With other plans, you could pay as much as $40 more for those services. And unlike other similarly priced unlimited plans, Sprint's includes mobile Internet service, walkie-talkie push-to-talk service, and GPS navigation. Unlimited plans aren't cheap, but if you need one, Sprint's is very generous. The trade-off: Sprint's service was among the lowest-rated in our surveys of cell-service customers.

Where to get it Sprint

not so hot

New stuff you can skip

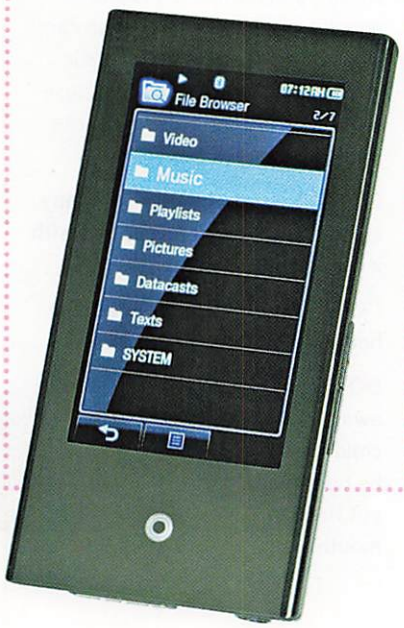
music to our ears

SAMSUNG YP-P2 $240

Why it's hot It's one of the first MP3 players to go wireless. So you can listen to music without any cords using Bluetooth headphones that you can buy separately. Also, it has a large touch screen, so you can access music, photos, videos, and other content with the touch of a finger. Other pluses: an FM radio, screen displays with groovy animation that moves to the music, and good video quality, so you can catch up on episodes of "30 Rock."

Bummers The battery dies after only 4 hours of watching videos, and the player costs a lot compared with other models, given its 1,000-song capacity.

Where to get it Electronics retailers



freezer burned

Ikea by Whirpool Corp. IR8GSNXR[W] $500

Ikea now offers appliances in addition to cabinets, flooring, and cookware. Its new Whirlpool fridge is tempting, with sleek looks and a slim profile meant to fit in tight spaces. Too bad it doesn't do a great job of keeping your food cold. And with only a half-shelf in the freezer, you'll have to dig. (The stainless-steel model, shown here, is $200 more.)

ShopSmart says If you want a better fridge that costs the same, get the higher-scoring Kenmore (Sears) 7787[2].

choose and lose

Capital One Credit Card Lab

The commercials say the online Lab lets you customize your card by choosing the features, including rewards and rates. But when you design your card, you quickly discover that there's a big catch. Say you choose a reward of 1 mile per dollar charged; the lowest interest rate you can get goes up from 7.4 percent to 9.4 percent. For 2 miles per dollar charged, the best you can do is 11.4 percent. And that's if you have excellent credit.

ShopSmart says Choose another card (see page 16 for options).

a pill of a grill

Fuego 02 gas grill, $1,700

It may look cool sitting on your patio, but our testers called the Fuego 02 nothing but a $1,700 hibachi. That's because you can cook only with the lid off, and cooking with a lid down is what keeps burgers and steaks nice and juicy. Also, food took longer to cook, and the more it cooked, the dryer it got.

ShopSmart says Skip this model and check out page 28 for our top grill picks.

Watch out for drugstore surprises

Homeopathic remedies with odd ingredients share shelves with conventional meds

Drugstore flu remedy Oscillococcinum, which claims to offer "natural relief," lists as active ingredients duck heart and liver. Don't start gagging yet: Oscillococcinum is a homeopathic drug, and each drop of the cocktail of duck heart and liver (which purportedly contains tiny amounts of the flu virus) is diluted with 99 drops of an inert ingredient. That diluted mixture is further cut by the same ratio in a procedure repeated 200 times. In the end, the mixture has 10^{400} (that's a 1 followed by 400 zeros) times as much of the inert ingredient as it does of the active ingredients.

LOOK AGAIN One of these has conventional drugs and the other doesn't.

It may sound exotic, but you can find many homeopathic products at your local drugstore, and it can be difficult to tell them apart from traditional over-the-counter meds. Zicam Allergy Relief, for example, is often sold right next to regular Zicam products that have FDA-reviewed ingredients. In a spot check of 52 drugstores, our shoppers often found homeopathic remedies shelved next to conventional ones.

Regular and homeopathic remedies may even be packaged together, as in the Nature's Cure "combination pack" for yeast infections. And though the Food and Drug Administration regulates homeopathic drugs, a spokeswoman says the agency doesn't approve them as "safe and effective" the way it does other medications—in part because resources are limited and because the ingredients are so diluted.

So what should you do? We don't think there's enough evidence to justify using these products. But even if you disagree, you should at least know what you're buying. So watch for the word homeopathic on packaging, or you could wind up taking what you *thought* was a proven remedy for that nasty yeast infection but wasn't. (No thanks!)

DRUGS ON TV

Requip's strange side effects

One TV ad that recently caught our eye is for Requip, a drug that treats "Restless Legs Syndrome," an uncontrollable impulse to move your legs. Although you may not have heard of RLS, some 3 percent of adults have moderate to severe symptoms—although the ad's description of these "strange sensations" is pretty vague and might leave some non-sufferers wondering if they have RLS. But Requip doesn't work for everyone. And, as the ad warns, it "may cause you to fall asleep or feel very sleepy during normal activities such as driving." Perhaps most puzzling, the ad also says it may cause "new or increased gambling, sexual, or other intense urges." Though this side effect is rare, a recent Mayo Clinic study of this class of drug included two people with no prior history of gambling problems who said they lost more than $100,000 each. So if you think you might have RLS, ask your doc about non-drug treatments before insisting on Requip.

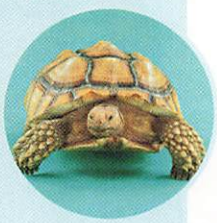
RISKY REPTILES

Small reptiles like turtles, iguanas, snakes, and horned toads are popular critters. But they often carry salmonella. (Sales of small turtles were banned in the 1970s because of the health risk.) Here are some reptile dos and don'ts:

DO wash hands, clothing, and any surfaces that come in contact with a pet reptile.

DON'T allow reptiles to roam the house, especially the kitchen.

DO keep reptiles away from small children, who may be tempted to put them in their mouths.



JUPITERIMAGES

3 things to buy for summer

This season's most wearable fashion trends, and how to get the looks for less

We asked a panel of fashion experts to choose one easy-to-wear item that will immediately update a spring and summer wardrobe. Here are their top picks, plus tips on how to wear them and how to get the look without blowing a fortune.

Panelist Dilys Blum, curator, Costume and Textiles, Philadelphia Museum of Art
Top pick Anything with a floral pattern
How to wear it You can make a floral dress officeworthy with a simple cardigan sweater or a short jacket in a solid color.
TIP Unless you're in your 20s, avoid retro-style floral dresses.
Get the look for less Try florals in small doses: a scarf or a blouse. (Shown: Marine blue cotton halter dress, $215, and cardigan, $145, Plenty by Tracy Reese)

Panelist Teri Agins, senior special writer and fashion reporter at The Wall Street Journal
Top pick Shiny clothes and accessories
How to wear them Shine is not just for evening anymore; it's a fresh look for the daytime. Gold or silver shoes or a sequined top worn with white jeans or pants looks especially chic. But wear only one shiny thing at a time.
Get the look for less Add shimmer with a big bangle. Look for clear Lucite (expensive) or plastic (cheaper) with a metallic sheen or metallic glitter, and make sure it's at least an inch wide.
(Shown: Lucite bangle with glitter, $275, Alexis Bittar)

Panelist Kate Moodie, freelance stylist
Top pick Sheers of organza or gazar or other gauzy fabrics
How to wear them Layer! And like shine, sheers aren't just for evening.
Get the look for less Try a scarf in a sheer fabric. Or buy an inexpensive sheer jacket or trench and toss it over a crewneck sweater and jeans. The jacket will also work over a plain shift dress at night. Or put a sheer blouse over a lingerie top with jeans or classic trousers.
(Shown: Sheer coral silk organza blouse over matching silk tank top, $210 for both, Karen Millen)

WENDELL WEBBER; STYLIST: JEFFSTYLES.COM; PHOTO OF DILYS BLUM: GRAYDON WOOD; PHOTO OF TERI AGINS: EVAN AGOSTINI/GETTY IMAGES

The best store credit cards

A bunch that offer great freebies and some to skip

After you plop your armload of goodies at the register, what usually comes next is the pitch to save 10 or 15 percent on your purchase if you apply for the store's credit card. When should you say yes? To find out, we picked apart 17 retailers' credit-card programs and found some big differences. Most track what you spend and give you a small portion back via coupons and gift cards, plus advance notice on sales. A few give you cash back. Many stores offer more than one rewards program. A store, for examle, may have one card with an American Express, Discover, MasterCard, or Visa logo, which means you can use it anywhere. The retailer may also offer a card—without any credit-card logos—that offers more basic rewards or sometimes none at all. But the store may still charge a lot of interest (so be sure to look for the logo before you sign up). Here are the cards with the best freebies. Just one warning: They make sense only if you pay off your bill each month, since most charge high rates. Big interest payments can easily exceed your rewards. If you carry balances, geta low-rate card. You can compare card rates at *www.bankrate.com* or *www.cardratings.com.*

Best for cash back

Costco and Wal-Mart give you the option of a cash-back reward that you can spend wherever you like. Neither caps the amount you can earn. Note that Wal-Mart's annual percentage rate varies depending on your credit rating.

Costco American Express

APR **15.99%**

You earn 1% on every dollar you spend at Costco or other retailers, 2% on airline and hotel charges, rental cars, and cruises, and 3% on restaurants and gas stations.

Wal-Mart Discover Card

APRs from **11.87% to 20.87%**

The cash rebate is based on 0.25% to 1% of every dollar you spend, with the rebates increasing the more you spend.

Skip these

Many stores offer two or more charge cards: a store card with a basic or no rewards program, and a rewards card with an American Express, Discover, MasterCard, or Visa logo. These stores offer no rewards program. To earn the most freebies, pay for purchases at these stores with another rewards card.

Abercrombie & Fitch APR **24.8%**

Crate & Barrel APR **19.8%**

Lowe's APR **21.99%**

STORE CARD DOs AND DON'Ts

DO be picky about which cards you sign up for. Applying for too many credit cards can hurt your credit score. So if you're planning to take out a loan soon, keep your new credit-card accounts to a minimum.

DON'T register for any card program before you see what it offers. There's no reason to sign up for a 10 percent discount on one purchase if that's all you'll ever buy at that store—heck, that's less than what you'd tip a waiter. You can usually find details online, or call the toll-free customer service number.

DO read your statements carefully. You can catch mistakes, of course, and notices about changes in the programs, which occur often. But you also might find an unexpected goody. More and more retailers are attaching a discount coupon to their bills that is geared to your purchase patterns, say analysts with market researcher The Tower Group.

DON'T miss payments or pay late. In addition to hitting you with high late fees and finance charges, many stores will set your reward clock to zero if you make one or two late payments. Ouch!

ILLUSTRATIONS: STEVEN GUARNACCIA

Best for loyal customers

If you love these stores and shop in them frequently, their cards are a good deal. They give decent rebates, mostly as gift certificates. You'll also get discount coupons. And they generally let you shop in stores or online.

Ann Taylor Visa

APR **12.24% to 16.24%**

Earn 4% on every dollar spent at Ann Taylor locations and anntaylor.com, and 1% spent elsewhere.

Barnes & Noble MasterCard

APR **15.74% to 21.24%**

Get 5% back on most store items, plus a point for each dollar charged elsewhere. 2,500 points earn a $25 gift certificate.

Bloomingdale's Visa

APR **22.9%**

You get a 3% reward for every dollar spent in the store and 1% for purchases made elsewhere. Requires $1,000 in Bloomie's purchases annually.

Macy's Visa

APR **22.9%**

Get up to a 3% reward for every dollar spent at Macy's, and 1% on purchases elsewhere, good toward gift certificates after you spend $500.

Target Visa

APR **12.74% to 21.74%**

You earn one point per dollar spent at Target and one point per $2 spent elsewhere; 1,000 points earns you 10% off one day of purchases.

Best for racking up points fast

These retailers offer rewards in conjunction with other stores, so you may be able to build your reward point total more quickly. So Banana Republic chinos can go into the same reward pot as Piperlime espadrilles.

A.J. Wright, Home Goods, Marshalls, TJMaxx MasterCard

APR **11.24% to 20.24%**

Get five points for every dollar spent at the four retailers, plus one point for each dollar spent elsewhere. For every 1,000 points you get a $10 gift certificate.

Banana Republic, Gap, Old Navy, Piperlime Visa

APR **21%**

Earn five points for in-store sales, one point for purchases elsewhere, and rack up $10 gift certificates for every 1,000 points. Special sales and free alterations when you spend $800 in a year.

Expo Design Center, Home Depot MasterCard

APR **13.24% to 19.24%**

Get three points for every dollar spent in stores; two for every dollar at gas stations, restaurants, grocery, and drug stores; one for every dollar spent elsewhere. Points can be redeemed for Home Depot gift cards, dining and entertainment, or travel.

Kmart, Sears MasterCard

APR **23.15%**

Earn one point per dollar spent; every 2,500 points earns you a $25 gift card.

Best for big spenders

The high-end stores below offer more lavish rewards. But only big-spenders get the coolest perks. How exotic do they get? You can earn a three-night stay in Prague from Neiman Marcus—for an eye-popping 1,000,000 points.

Bergdorf Goodman, Neiman Marcus APR **22.25%**

Earn one point per dollar spent at either store. You need at least 5,000 points to receive benefits. Rewards include points toward air travel. At the 10,000 point level, you can get a $250 gift card. At 100,000 points, you get a trip to Canyon Ranch spa or a $2,500 gift card.

Nordstrom Visa

6% to 20.9%

Earn two points for every dollar you spend at Nordstrom and one point for purchases elsewhere. Every 2,000 points earns a $20 Nordstrom certificate. If you spend over $2,000 annually, you get free shipping and access to private sales. More than 10,000 earns free concierge services and basic alterations.

Saks Fifth Avenue MasterCard

APR **21.9%**

Earn two points per dollar spent in Saks stores or online up to the first $5,000 annually, four points for every dollar up to $10,000, then six points for every dollar above $10,000. You can earn one point per dollar spent at other retailers. And 2,000 points earns you a $20 gift card, free shipping, and advance notice of sales. You can also get discounts on vacations.

Pack it in

Cool ways to organize on the road

Halfway through your trip, does your suitcase look like it's been ransacked? Do you spend precious minutes searching for clean undies, hairspray, or a comb? Well, there is a solution; actually, there are dozens. You can now find all kinds of packing organizers to help you squeeze in more clothes and keep them tidier and easier to find. It's more important than ever to pack smart: Some airlines, including United and US Airways, now charge extra for a second checked bag; you could also get hit with a $50 to $100 fee for bags heavier than 50 pounds. And charges can really add up—a second checked bag on United that's overweight and oversize could cost you up to $450 round-trip. Here's a sampling of cool organizers to help cut suitcase clutter. We didn't tear them apart in our labs, but we will be testing luggage in the coming months.

2 FOLD IT Press and fold shirts like a dry cleaner with fold-it organizers, most of which come with a folding board and instructions.

Try these Armor Gear Texas Fold'em Garment Sleeve from ebags, $22, *www.ebags.com* (shown) ■ **Lewis N Clark Packing Envelopes, $39, *www.travelwares.com***

1 CUBE IT Packing cubes are soft "boxes" made of durable, lightweight materials, such as nylon, usually closed with a zipper. Once you start using them, you may find yourself collecting them: one for socks, one for undies, another to hold earphones, moisturizer, and a neck pillow on long plane rides. You can find them in many sizes and colors, some with see-through plastic covers, others with mesh inserts.

Try these Eagle Creek Pack-It Cube, $12, *www.eagle creek.com* (shown) ■ **Magellan's Packing Cubes, $17 (set of three), *www.magellans.com***

3 COMPRESS IT

Compression bags save space by squishing the air out a one-way vent. One manufacturer claims these bags give you up to 80 percent more space, but you may get less. Take an extra along so you can keep your dirty socks away from your last clean blouse. Another bonus: The clothes inside will stay dry, even if your bag gets stuck in a rainstorm on the runway. Just don't pack easily wrinkled fabrics this way.

Try these Pack-it Compression Sac Set, $26, *www.magellans.com* (shown) ■ **Shoreline Pack Mates (medium), $8, *www.luggage.com*** ■ **Easy Go Space Savers, $15, *www.moriluggage.com***

4 BAG IT

The new 3-1-1 carry-on rule limits you to 3-ounce bottles of liquids, one quart-size plastic bag, and only one bag per person. But flimsy plastic bags from the grocery store might be ripped and useless by the end of a long trip. So manufacturers have stepped in with tough plastic bags, some with refillable 3-ounce containers inside.

Try these Belle Hop Carry-On Bottle Set, $15, *www.ebags.com* (shown) ■ **Travelon 1-Quart Zip-Top Bag with Bottles, $8, *www.luggageonline.com***

5 STRAP IT

If you often overstuff your suitcase, you may want to invest in a little extra protection. A luggage strap can be a lifesaver on a vacation when you find too many good souvenir deals to pass up. The newer ones, with locks approved by the Transportation Security Administration, can secure your bags in transit.

Try this Eagle Creek TSA-approved Security Strap, $15, *www.traveloasis.com* (shown)

WENDELL WEBBER; PROP STYLIST: JEFFSTYLES.COM

LOAD LIGHTENERS

NEED HELP SLIMMING DOWN YOUR SUITCASE? CHECK OUT THESE WEB SITES:

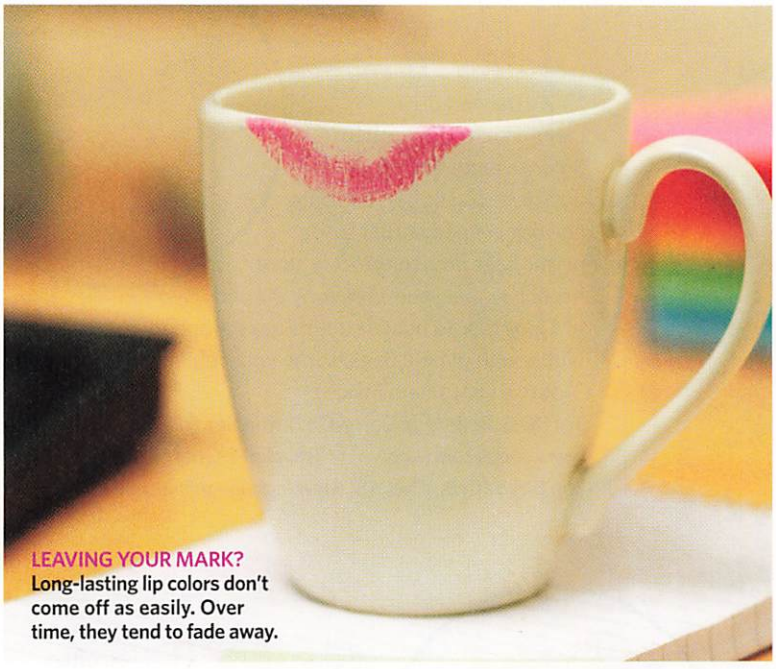
ONEBAG.COM shows you how to cram all you need for any trip into one bag.
TIP Use space inside your packed shoes for fragile items.

TRAVELITE.ORG has suggestions on selecting the best clothes and luggage for your travel.
TIP To make packing easy, color-coordinate all your clothing, using neutrals as a base.

RICKSTEVES.COM explains how to spend weeks in Europe with just a few changes of clothing.
TIP If you're not going to wear an item more than three times, don't pack it. And look for patterns and fabrics that don't show wrinkles.

MAGELLANS.COM offers a slew of packing articles and includes an electrical adapter guide.
TIP If you're taking a jacket on the plane, stuff the pockets.

TSA.GOV lists the latest TSA rules. Did you know that you can wear a gel-insert bra on a plane but not gel shoe inserts?



LEAVING YOUR MARK? Long-lasting lip colors don't come off as easily. Over time, they tend to fade away.

Lip color that lasts

Do 8- or 16-hour lipsticks actually work? Well, yes and no.

Imagine a lipstick that looks great all day without touch-ups. You could drop the kids off at day care, get through meals, meetings, and a workout and still look sexy for dinner. Many companies sell "long-lasting" lipsticks that they claim will last 8 or even 16 hours, but do they really work? To find out, we had 14 women try four products over a two-week period. (All the labels were covered or removed so panelists wouldn't be biased by brand names.) Timers were used to remind testers to check their lips every few hours for up to 16 hours. The result: Each lipstick generally looked great for several hours, much longer than regular lipsticks usually last. But then they all began to wear off, falling short of their 8-hours-plus claims. Panelists complained that the lipsticks dried out their lips and that they had to keep reapplying gloss during the day. (All the lipsticks we tested are two-part systems; you have to apply both a color and a gloss.) And if you mess up while applying the stuff, you have to take it off using a makeup remover (a simple swipe with a tissue won't do it) and start over. So you may not want to use these lipsticks every day, but they're good for weddings, conventions, and other days when you want your lipstick to stick around for a while.

three worth a try

Cover Girl Outlast All-Day Lipcolor, L'Oréal Infallible Never Fail Lipcolour, and Maybelline Superstay Lipcolor
Price $9
What our panelists said Each lipcolor looked great for 4 hours, but over time they all flecked, faded, or began to look a bit blotchy, and left most lips feeling dry.

GOOD as new

Staffer Pat Slaven, a chemical engineer with a master's degree in textile science, tells you how to clean up any mess like a pro.

THE MESS Got a regular lipstick stain? Here's how to get rid of it fast!

CLEANUP ADVICE Blot stains on washable fabrics with an acetone-based nail-polish remover (check an inside seam first). If that doesn't work, try a cleaning solvent like Afta cleaner/degreaser, then blot the stain with a solution of 1 teaspoon of clear liquid dish detergent in a cup of warm water. If the garment says "dry clean only" or is made from acetate, sorry—there's no quick fix (nail-polish remover dissolves acetate). Take the garment to the dry cleaner.

CUP: STOCKBYTE PHOTOGRAPHY/VEER

kiss this one good-bye

Estée Lauder Double Wear Stay-in-Place Lip Duo
Price $24
What our panelists said Like the other lipsticks we tried, this one looked great for at least 4 hours, but it got some of the same comments about flecking bits and blotchiness. It also received the most complaints for leaving a line of color around the edge of the lips as it faded. So there's no reason to pay a premium price for this lipstick.

LIP LINES

We polled 1,600 ShopSmart readers about their lipstick habits. Here's what they had to say.

13 The average number of lipsticks and lip glosses owned (28% said they own more than 15).

41 The percentage of women who said they carry between three and 10 lipsticks or lip glosses in their purse.

20 The percentage of women who've returned lipsticks.

4 The average number of lipsticks and lip glosses used on a regular basis.

3 The average number of times most women reapply lipstick during the day (25% apply it four or more times).

6 The average number of lipsticks our readers buy per year.

21 The percentage of women who keep lipsticks around for three or more years. That's a no-no! As we've said before, toss them after one or two years, max. After that, they can become contaminated.

Pucker up

Tips for perfect lips when using long-lasting products.

DO follow instructions carefully. That means starting with lips that are clean and dry.

DON'T be impatient. Wait 1 to 2 minutes to let the layer of lipstick color dry before you put on the gloss. You may have to walk around the house making guppy lips, as one of our panelists complained.

DO start over if you make a mistake. Applying these products is kind of like using a waterproof semi-permanent marker on your lips; any slips or uneven application will be on display, hour after hour. To start over, remove it, then clean and dry your lips well and begin again.

DON'T try to rub it off. You'll just end up with sore, color-stained lips. See what remover the manufacturer recommends on the label; otherwise, baby oil or an oil-based makeup remover should do the job.

DO check the store's return policy before you buy. Colors on displays rarely look like what's in the tube.

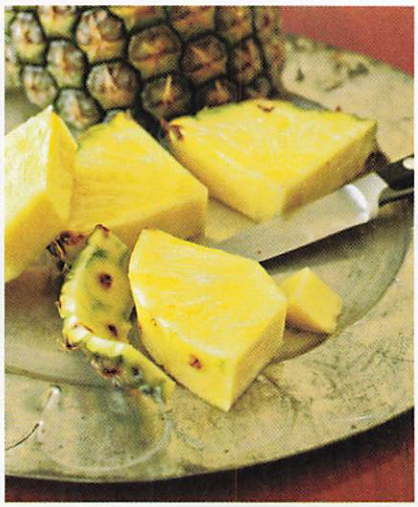
The kiss test

We wondered if long-lasting lipsticks would leave telltale smooch marks. So our writer volunteered to conduct an unscientific test with her boyfriend. **THE RESULT** All the lipsticks left behind only a slight trace of gloss.

LIPSTICKS: WENDELL WEBBER

Here's everything you need for a backyard bash: the best grills, wines, and our all-grilled, no-fuss menu {yes, even dessert!}

all fired up



It's supposed to be a party, right? So why aren't you out there yukking it up with Uncle Fred and enjoying yourself? Probably because you're ferrying food in and out of the house, working those sliding doors right off their tracks. Well, here's how to get into the backyard-barbecue mood without resorting to takeout: Try our delicious all-grilled menu. And when we say all, we mean *all*—steak, veggies, and dessert. Our menu is built around the freshest, most flavorful seasonal ingredients, so you don't need to do a lot of sweaty prep work. But before you turn up the music and pour the wine (no need to sweat that either; our pros picked two bottles that should go great with this menu), we've also got some tips to boost your grilling confidence before you start flipping steaks for company. The last thing you want is a pricey slab of meat that looks done on the outside but is raw when guests cut into it. See our tricks for heading off the most common grilling disasters on page 24—and check out the latest grills on page 28. You'll see our testers' tops picks, as well as one model that could cause a fire. Also ahead: how to time the cooking so everything comes out perfect, and other stress-reducing tips. Because there's no reason you shouldn't have fun at your party too!

JAMES BAIGRIE; FOOD STYLIST: MICHAEL PEDERSON; PROP STYLIST: LYNDA WHITE

Grilling 911
avoiding barbecue blunders

To help you sidestep some common grilling mistakes, we tapped the expert advice of barbecue-cookbook author Steven Raichlen *(www.barbecuebible.com)*, as well as our in-house grillmeisters.

YIKES! The burgers stick to the grates and/or won't sear properly.
TRY THIS Next time, preheat the grill for 15 to 20 minutes. A gas grill tends to burn cooler than a charcoal one, so fully preheat it before cooking burgers, steak, or other foods. Oil the grates before throwing on the meat. Simply fold two paper towels into a tight pad, dip it in a bowl of vegetable oil, and, using a pair of tongs, rub the pad across the grates.

YIKES! That pricey steak is as dry as leather.
TRY THIS Next time, cook with the lid down to seal in juices and insure proper cooking time; an open lid allows heat to escape and compromises roasting, so food can take longer to cook and can end up drying out. Some new grills we tested have infrared burners with no direct flame, which are great for searing meat on the outside without overcooking it.

YIKES! The chicken is raw inside.
TRY THIS Use high heat for searing poultry and thick cuts of meat, then lower the temp to finish cooking. Stick a meat thermometer into the thickest part of chicken and burgers or the sides of steaks and chops to gauge when proper cooking temperatures have been reached. (See "How to Tell When It's Done," page 29.)

YIKES! The meat tastes like cardboard.
TRY THIS To add flavor and tenderness to meat, use an acidic marinade made with vinegar, lemon juice, or wine.

YIKES! The salmon steaks are on fire.
TRY THIS To prevent flare-ups, don't overcrowd the cooking surface. Keep at least 40 percent of the grate surface empty, if possible. And if fatty foods such as salmon or rib-eye steaks flame up, move them to a cooler section of the grate.

{the recipes}

This dinner party menu will serve six to eight, but you can easily double the recipes if your guest list expands. What makes this party a breeze is that everything is cooked on the grill—though not all at once, of course. But you can use your grill, just as you use your stove, to juggle a bunch of dishes. While the steak is sizzling on the hottest part of the grill, keep the corn warm in a cooler area, which can act as a warming oven. Be sure to check out "Time It Right," page 26, which has tips on when to start each item so that all your dishes come off the grill at the same time.

GRILLED CORN ON THE COB

6-8 ears of corn in their husk

Heat grill to medium high with the lid closed. Meanwhile, peel off the first few layers of the husk, leaving a few layers to protect the corn. (Be sure that none of the silk is exposed or it could catch fire.) Place corn on heated grill and turn every 3 to 5 minutes for 15 minutes. Remove from heat and serve immediately or keep warm.

LIME-AND-TEQUILA-MARINATED FLANK STEAK

- 3 lb. flank steak
- ¼ cup rice vinegar
- ¼ cup tequila
- ⅔ cup fresh lime juice (about 3 to 4 medium to large limes)
- ⅔ cup olive oil
- 1 tablespoon chopped garlic
- Salt and pepper to taste

Place steak in a deep dish. Mix vinegar, tequila, lime juice, olive oil, garlic, and salt and pepper in a small bowl; pour over steak. Cover and marinate in the fridge for several hours. Preheat grill on medium for 10 minutes with the lid closed. Cook steak 4 minutes per side. **TIP** Cook approximately 2 minutes, rotate a quarter turn, and cook 2 more minutes. Flip and repeat until done (145° F for medium rare on a meat thermometer; 160° F for medium). Brush with marinade after each turn except the last. Wait 5 to 7 minutes before serving. Cut into thin slices across the grain for tenderness.

time it right

FIRST Cook the corn. Remove it from the grill surface to the warming rack of the grill.
NEXT Cook the flank steak. Remove it from the grill and put it on a cutting board or platter to rest.
THEN Cook the vegetable skewers.
AFTER THAT Slice the flank steak and put the corn and kabobs onto platters.
FINALLY Cook the fruit and keep it warm while serving the main course or wait until after the meal—the fruit takes just a few minutes.

VEGETABLE SKEWERS WITH GARLIC AND FENNEL

- 2 to 3 summer squash or zucchini
- 2 to 3 small to medium eggplants
- 1 pint small cherry tomatoes
- 1 pint small white mushrooms, stems removed
- 6 to 8 long metal skewers

MARINADE

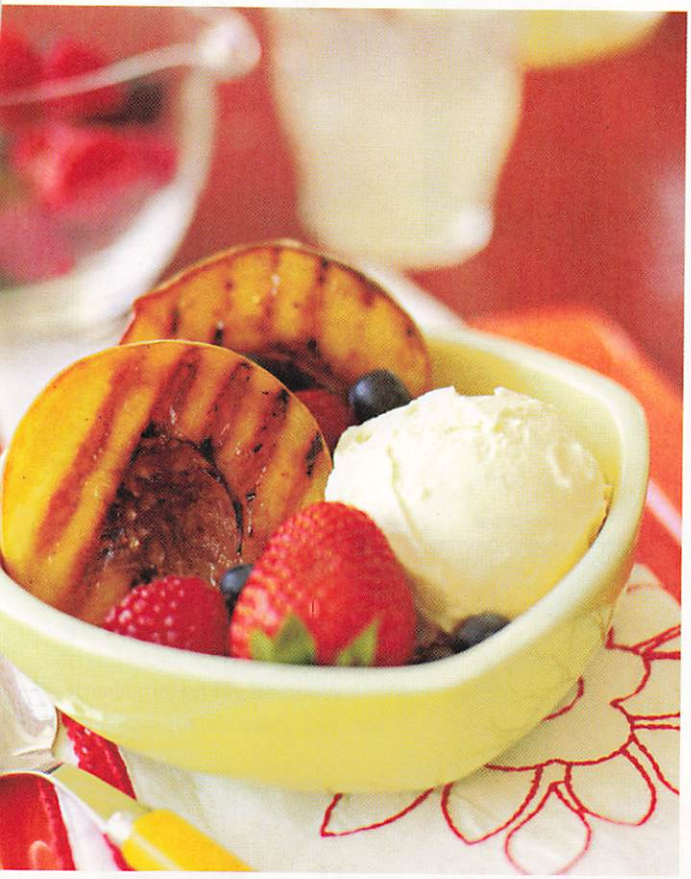
- ¼ cup soy sauce
- ¼ cup lemon juice
- ⅔ cup olive oil
- 1 tablespoon chopped garlic
- ½ teaspoon fennel seed
- Salt and pepper to taste

Cut vegetables into half-inch cubes (leave cherry tomatoes and mushroom caps whole) and thread on the skewers. Use two pieces of each veggie per skewer. Arrange skewers in one layer in a deep dish. Mix the remaining ingredients in a bowl; pour over veggies. Marinate for no more than 15 to 20 minutes. Place skewers on a medium-hot grill and close the lid. Cook 2 minutes per side. **TIP** Cook about 1 minute, then rotate a quarter turn, and cook 1 minute more. Flip skewer and repeat until done. Brush with marinade after each turn.

STEAK & PEACHES: JAMES BAIGRIE; FOOD STYLIST: MICHAEL PEDERSON; PROP STYLIST: LYNDA WHITE

{the wine}

For our all-grilled menu, try the **Columbia Crest Grand Estates 2004**, $11, a merlot, or the **Dona Paula Estate 2006**, $16, a malbec. Both reds go great with meaty meals.



GRILLED SUMMER FRUIT

1 pineapple or 3 to 4 medium peaches
Vanilla ice cream
Fresh strawberries, raspberries, or blueberries

Peel and core the pineapple and cut into 1-inch slices. If using peaches, cut them in half and remove pits but don't peel. On medium-hot grill, cook peaches skin-side up for 4 minutes, flip and cook 3 or 4 more minutes. Cook pineapple 2 minutes per side. Serve with ice cream and berries.

6 must-haves

Every griller needs these

1. A meat thermometer
2. A long wooden-handled spatula for safe flipping
3. A wire or nylon brush for cleaning the grill
4. Long wooden-handled metal tongs, which will stay cooler to the touch than all-metal ones
5. A long wooden-handled fork to spear foods
6. Long metal skewers for kabobs
7. Long barbecue mitts to protect the cook's arms

Grills that sizzle

What to buy if you need a big barbecue—or just a pretty one

We ran 37 of the latest gas grills though weeks of testing and cooked up more than 160 pounds of steaks, chicken, and fish. If you're in the market for a new grill and will use it a lot, look for conveniences like electronic igniters, side burners that let you cook more than one dish at a time, and stainless-steel or coated-cast-iron grates for better searing and consistent grilling temperatures. Also, consider no-rust painted steel or porcelain-coated steel models that come in fun colors to jazz up the deck. Both materials are easier to maintain than stainless steel. Here are our top picks.

bargain buy

Brinkmann 810-8410S

Price $200

Why we like it It's a good midsized grill that can cook about 24 burgers at a time, with a side burner and porcelain-coated grates that are good for searing.

Bummer There's no rotisserie burner for doing whole chickens.

Where to get it Home Depot

pretty in red

The Charbroil Red 463250108

Price $600

Why we like it This midsized model is made of porcelain-coated steel, which is easier to keep clean than stainless; also, it won't rust. And the bright red color is fun.

Bummer Cooking wasn't as even as on the Brinkmann grill.

Where to get it Home Depot

smart splurge

Weber Summit S-470 2740001

Price $1,800

Why we like it It's loaded with cool features like a rotisserie burner, a smoke box, light-up knobs, and lots of storage below. Plus the burners are backed by a long warranty.

Bummer Extras cost a lot.

Where to get it Home hardware centers, independent retailers

portable pick

Weber Q 200 396002

Price $190

Why we like it Portable grills are great for tailgating or camping, and this one offers more cooking space and better grilling than others we tested. Plus you can put it on a stand for backyard use.

Where to get it Home hardware centers, independent retailers

the crowd-pleaser

Kenmore 16315

Price $570

Why we like it You can flip 30 or more burgers at a time for big parties. It has a rotisserie, side burners, and extra storage. Burners have a 10-year warranty.

Bummer Larger grills can gobble up patio space.

Where to get it Sears

SAFETY alert

Don't buy it!

The $650 **Broil King Signet 90 986784** gave our testers a scare when the bottom of the firebox turned to molten aluminum on two different grills. This is a safety risk! If you have this grill, the company says it will send you a free retrofit kit that it says will address the problem, but we won't know for sure until we test it.

Keep your grill working great

FOLLOW THESE 5 MAINTENANCE TIPS

1 **Keep it clean.** Before and after cooking, clean grates with a stiff wire brush unless they're porcelain-coated, in which case you should use a more gentle nylon brush to get rid of stuck-on debris.

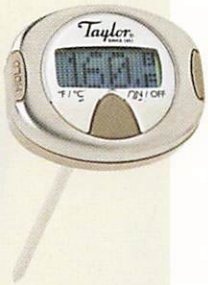
2 **Remove any grease.** Right after cooking, use mild, soapy water to wash grease from exterior surfaces.

3 **Don't let stains sit.** Lightly rub stains off with a fine-steel-wool pad dipped in soapy water. For stainless exteriors, use a soft cloth or sponge, and avoid harsh cleaners. Apply a grease-cutting solution, followed by an all-purpose cleaner and then stainless polish.

4 **Check for gas leaks.** Do this quick test periodically: Mix a small amount of dishwashing liquid and water in a spray bottle. Spray the soapy solution over connections and along the hose. Bubbling means you need to change a part or fix a loose connection.

5 **Cover it when you're done grilling.** That will protect the barbecue from weather wear and tear.

how to tell when it's done



Use a meat thermometer placed in the meat and this guide from the Department of Agriculture to gauge when beef, pork, chicken, lamb, and fish are cooked just right.

BEEF BURGERS 160° F

BEEF STEAKS AND ROASTS 145° F (medium-rare) and 160° F (medium)

LAMB 145° F (medium-rare) or 160° F (medium)

CHICKEN 165° F

FISH 145° F, or until it looks opaque and separates easily with a fork

PORK 160° F

{the little extras}

Sometimes it's the details that make a party come to life. We asked New York caterer Anstice Carroll, a whiz at staging outdoor weddings and parties, for some of her best tips.

THE HORS D'OEUVRES Focus on small portions and things that are easy to eat while standing, talking, and holding a drink. Carroll's faves: Miniature veggies like bite-size tomatoes and all varieties of mini squashes grilled on a skewer and served with dips in colorful, hollowed-out peppers; gazpacho or another cold soup served in tiny shot glasses; and for the easiest hors d'oeuvres ever, fill a large basket with tiny grape tomatoes and serve them alongside a couple of big hunks of cheese. "Opulence makes a show, and even makes the mundane look special," she says.

THE TABLE Show off food against a clean backdrop. "I go for simple tablecloths without a lot of pattern, in solid colors or crisp stripes to allow the beauty of the food to show through," Carroll says. Her favorite summer combo: a blue-and-white tablecloth with big red napkins. If you don't have a big enough cloth, a flat sheet is a great stand-in.

THE FLOWERS Carroll mixes seasonal flowers and fresh vegetables in party arrangements. "Take any flower you like in colors you like and mix in baby pattypan squashes or colorful mini peppers," she says. Or keep the composition simple by going with all white snowball hydrangeas and airy Queen Anne's lace in glass jars to brighten the table.

Where the really big DISCOUNTS are hiding

The secrets to saving hundreds or even thousands of dollars on everything from furniture and flat-screen TVs to cars, doctor bills, and more!

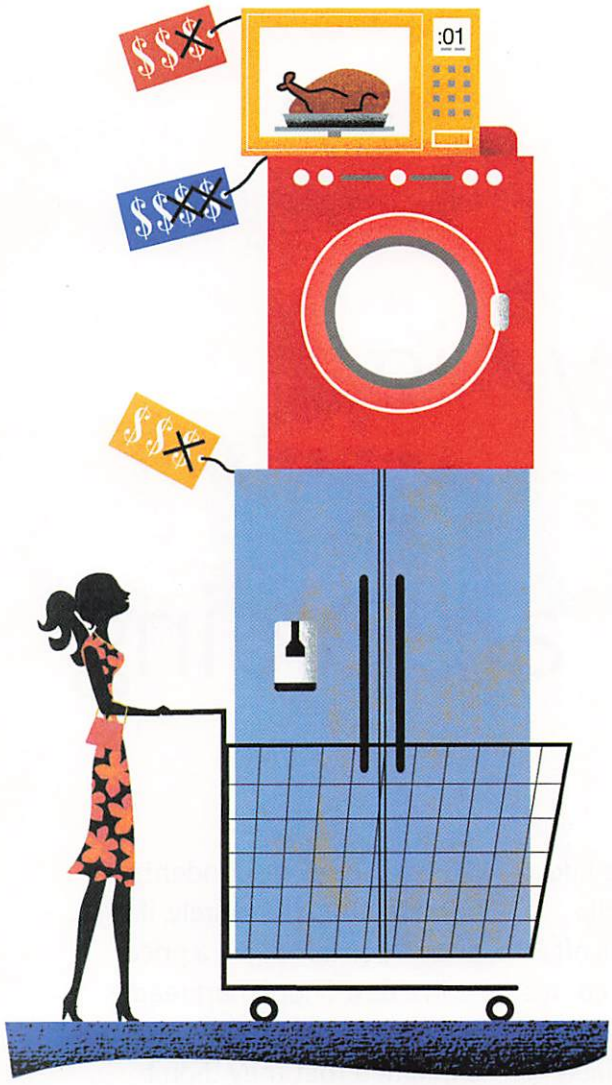
You go out of your way to find a cheap gas station and clip coupons to shave pennies off grocery bills. But when it comes to big stuff like furniture and flat-screen TVs, you probably pay whatever the price tag says. OK, maybe you wait for a sale or shop around for a low price. Well, odds are you can save a lot more, maybe hundreds or thousands of dollars more. The trick is knowing how to ask for a better price.

In a survey by the Consumer Reports National Research Center, the vast majority of people who haggled over furniture, electronics, appliances, and even doctor bills said they had snagged at least one discount in the past three years. But in the same survey, 40 percent of respondents admitted that they rarely, if ever, even try to talk down a price.

In a new ShopSmart reader poll, nearly one in three women explained that they didn't haggle because they were worried about looking foolish. But many retailers expect you to try to negotiate, thanks at least in part to the Internet, where it's easy to research the price of just about anything. And with the economy slowing, sellers should be even more eager to give you a break in the months ahead.

We asked negotiating pros and haggle-happy readers for their success stories. Read on and learn how to rack up some great discounts yourself. As you'll see, you just need to learn a few tricks to get started.

ILLUSTRATIONS: JING AND MIKE CO.



Appliances

TRUE STORY
Saved: 50%

Annmarie Kahl, an accountant from Carle Place, N.Y., had her eye on a $1,350 fridge at Lowe's. It was part of a display kitchen that was being remodeled, so she asked the salesclerk for a discount, but he wouldn't budge. However, every time she came back, the price was lower. Finally, she told a salesman, "I notice the refrigerator has been here for a while and it's not moving. I'll give you $550." They eventually settled on $650—or more than half off.

The lesson If you can't get the price you want the first time, walk away and try again another time.

Also try this

- **Ask for a volume discount.** Redoing an entire kitchen? Ask what the salesperson can do for you if you buy two or more appliances. Or shop with someone who is buying similar items. "You increase your leverage," says Michael Soon Lee, an author of "Black Belt Negotiating" (Amacom, 2007), who recently got a big break when he and his brother bought a pair of chandeliers together.
- **Seek happy haggling grounds.** National chains like Home Depot and Sears generally won't negotiate unless an item is a floor model or damaged, or advertised for less elsewhere. You'll have better luck at independent stores and regional chains like P.C. Richard and HH Gregg. But check prices online first to check the going rate. (Or you can try ShopSmart Mobile. See "How to Talk Down Any Price," below, for info on how to subscribe.)
- **Ask for a break on delivery or installation.** You may find more wiggle room here than on the price, especially given a recent shift in antitrust law allowing manufacturers more ability to defend minimum retail prices, says Alex Cheimets, editor of ApplianceAdvisor.com.

Another way to save Sign up for alerts about promotions and rebates at manufacturers' sites, and at retailer-coupon sites like *www.keepcash.com*.

How to TALK DOWN any price

Always remember that the first price you see or hear isn't necessarily the bottom line. "The market has always had two prices," says G. Richard Shell, who teaches negotiation at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School and is an author of "The Art of Woo" (Portfolio, 2007). "There's the price on the tag, and the price you may get about 40 percent of the time if you negotiate." That's why you should never hesitate to haggle. Here are some rules to get started.

NEVER buy anything major without first researching prices. Go to sites like *www.bizrate.com, www.shopzilla.com, www.pricegrabber.com, www.shopping.com,* and *www.shopping.yahoo.com.* Also, look through store ads. You can take this info to local stores, which may be willing to match or beat the prices. (A cell-phone service that can help you get prices while you're out shopping is ShopSmart Mobile. Ask your carrier about how to subscribe.) And be sure to visit competing stores in the area. David H. Sternblitz, vice president of the Zales jewelry chain, says his stores allow salespeople to haggle with customers who have checked prices at other stores. But don't fake it. Salespeople can see right through a phony price quote, says Erica Dawson, who teaches negotiating skills at the Yale School of Management.

ALWAYS ask, "Can you do better for me?" If the saleswoman doesn't immediately take the bait and offer you a lower price, you can ask, "Do you have a coupon, or a sale coming up?" She might let you in on another way to save.

NEVER start with the price you're willing to pay. That's a mistake a lot of people make, experts say. Start at a lower price, so you have room to maneuver.

Furniture

TRUE STORY
Saved: 10%

Wharton School professor G. Richard Shell was in a high-end custom furniture store one day arranging a gift certificate for his wife in the form of a picture of an end table and a prepared purchase order. As the saleswoman was drawing it up, Shell said, "I know you don't negotiate prices, but I know you have sales." He says she looked at him and said, "Now that you mention it, we are having a sale." That earned him a 10 percent discount.

The lesson Always ask about upcoming sales before you plunk down your money.

Also try this

Time it right. You'll find the best haggling opportunities for furniture around Presidents Day and July 4, when stores need to make room for merchandise they order at the High Point Market, held each spring and fall in High Point, N.C., says Jaclyn C. Hirschhaut, a vice president of the American Home Furnishings Alliance, a trade group based in High Point. If you must have that sofa sooner, shop at the end of the month, when store owners are balancing their books, says Steve DeHaan, executive vice president of the National Home Furnishings Association, another trade group. Just be sure to avoid late fall, when stores are swamped with shoppers upgrading their furniture for the holidays.

Ask for extras. When the price is non-negotiable, author Michael Soon Lee asks instead for freebies like a pad to protect a new dining room table or a gift certificate for his next purchase.

Research online before you set foot in a store. Use the Web to study style and price. When you're ready to order, keep in mind that some retailers, such as JCPenney, allow you to buy online and then pick up at the store, which can save you shipping fees.

Another way to save Visit High Point, where dozens of furniture dealers have showrooms, and 10 percent off is possible after big trade shows in spring and fall. (Find out more at *www.highpointchamber.org* and *www.highpoint.org*) Because furniture once made in the High Point area is now largely imported, prices aren't as low as they used to be, says DeHaan. But you can still get deals at nearby outlets or local chains like Boyles Furniture.

ALWAYS **decide what you're willing to give up to get a better deal.** Once you know what you can't live without, you'll be able to focus on what's important and use the other stuff as negotiating points, says Dawson. For example, maybe you don't absolutely need heated seats in that new car, but you must have rear speakers.

NEVER **take "no" from someone who can't say "yes."** If you hit a roadblock, it may be because the salesperson doesn't have the authority to lower the price. So ask to speak with the manager or supervisor instead.

ALWAYS **remember to offer payment on the spot when possible.** This is especially effective with contractors and other service providers who don't want to chase after clients for money.

NEVER **be afraid of silent pauses.** They can be uncomfortable, but sometimes provoke a better offer.

ALWAYS **take your time.** Ask a lot of questions and go back more than once. It's natural for a salesperson who has invested time to want to close a deal.

NEVER **overlook the power of observation.** ShopSmart reader Jo Oliver recalls falling in love with a vintage Victrola phonograph with a $250 price tag, about $100 more than she wanted to spend. After some discussion, the seller said he couldn't let it go for less than $200. "I said, 'It's awfully dusty... it looks like nobody's looked at the piece,' " Oliver recalls. Then she offered $150—cash. "He said, 'OK, it is taking up a lot of space.' " Another way to save: Use product flaws that you can fix or live with to negotiate a lower price.

ALWAYS **try to get a break on something else if a salesperson won't lower the price.** Ask for a deal on delivery or installation, for example.

NEVER **give up.** "A little success breeds a lot of confidence," Shell says. Soon a one-shot experiment becomes a new way of looking at the marketplace. Sellers need to make sales, and you need to stay within budget. Remember: The worst that can happen is that someone says no. At least you'll know you're not missing out on any discounts that you could have nabbed.

Clothing

TRUE STORY Saved: 20% ShopSmart reader Sheryl Allen says she often shows up at department stores the night before an advertised sale so she can make nice with the salespeople and wrangle a night-before discount. She says she has gotten 20 percent off at Macy's and at Kohl's by asking for the sale price the night before the sale.

The lesson It often pays to make friends with salespeople.

Also try this

- **Look for imperfections.** It's easier to haggle if buttons are missing.
- **Be a regular.** Boutiques can be more expensive than department stores, but it can pay to frequent one you like, says Frances Harder, a fashion-industry consultant in Los Angeles. Small stores are more likely to give a familiar face a friendly break.
- **Offer cash.** This is another good strategy at boutiques. Hammered by fees paid to credit-card companies, they may be more willing to bend on the price if you offer cash. And shop at the end of the season, when stores need space for new inventory.

Another way to save Shop at discount sites like *www.6pm.com*, which slashes prices on shoes by up to 75 percent. Tony Hsieh, CEO of Zappos.com, says that's where they send items at the end of each season, after they've stopped selling on Zappos. You can also score big discounts at the sale areas of fashion sites like Bluefly.com and eLuxury.com.

Hotel rooms

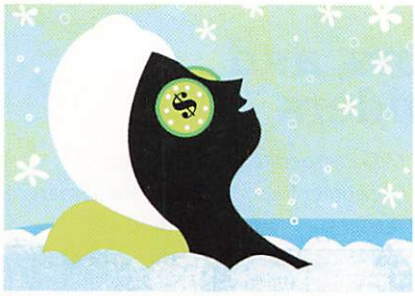
TRUE STORY Saved: 75% On their way to an inexpensive hotel in Maryland, ShopSmart reader Regina Smith and her husband stopped by a chic inn and ended up taking a $600 room—at a 75 percent discount. It was 4 p.m. on a Wednesday, and the inn needed warm bodies. The clerk offered the room at half price. When the couple demurred, "the guy literally followed us out to the parking lot to say, '$150 and it's done,' " Smith says.

The lesson Take advantage when timing is on your side.

Also try this

- **Ask the front desk for a price break.** "Do you have a room that's not quite so nice?" is a good way to start, says travel writer Chuck Thompson. You may also want to ask about out-of-order rooms that may have just a broken lamp or a carpet stain. But be discreet—the clerk probably doesn't want the whole lobby to hear about your "special deal." More than 70 percent of readers in a Consumer Reports survey said they were able to haggle their way to a discount or an upgrade, especially if they negotiated face-to-face. It even worked at high-end hotels like the Ritz-Carlton.
- **Offer to stay another night.** ShopSmart reader Wendy Grossmann says she once found a nice hotel, but the rate was too high. So she told the hotel that she had planned to stay two nights, but if the price were right, she might make it four. Guess what? She got a break.
- **Book early.** Hotels are sometimes willing to give a good rate if you book far ahead to lock in business. To hedge your bets, find a decent unrestricted rate early, then call back 24 to 72 hours before you arrive. If the rate has dropped, you usually can cancel and rebook without penalty. Be sure you're canceling within the hotel's alloted time frame.

Another way to save Priceline.com and Hotwire.com offer heavily discounted rooms. The catch: Sometimes sales are final and the sites might not identify the hotel until you pay. For tips on bidding at Priceline, go to *www. biddingfortravel .com*. Last-minute travelers should also go to *www.lastminute.com*. And check out hotel sites for special offers.



Salons and spas

TRUE STORY Saved: 50%

Wendy Grossmann and her mother had spent the morning getting dolled up at a local spa and were preparing to leave when Grossmann had an idea. The place was empty, so she leaned across the counter and said, "We are having such a wonderful time, and we'd like to stay a little longer, but I am at the top of my budget. Would you have any discounted services this afternoon?" The desk clerk disappeared and came back with an offer: half off other spa services. Grossmann and her mom promptly signed up for massages.

The lesson Think like the business owner: A customer in hand is worth two in the parking lot.

Also try this

Ask for discounts for referring customers. ShopSmart reader Kathleen Worley sent a friend to her hair salon and followed up by asking for a discount on her next hairdo. "A lot of times all you have to do is ask if discounts are offered for referrals," she says.

Go during the slow season. If you dream of spending five days at a deluxe spa, call and negotiate a discount during a slow period.

Cars

TRUE STORY Saved: 19%

Tamara Hubbard of Village of Hoffman Estates, Ill., researched car prices online and then used that information to negotiate with dealers via e-mail. The result: She saved a whopping $5,700 off the $29,595 sticker price on a 2008 Honda Odyssey minivan. She also got top dollar for her trade-in.

The lesson Information is power.

Also try this

Ignore the sticker price. Find out what the dealer paid for the car and negotiate from there. You can figure this out by getting the "dealer invoice price" and subtracting any dealer incentives or rebates. Consumer Reports does this for you in its New Car Price Reports ($14 per model; go to *www.ConsumerReports.org*). Also check out free auto-pricing Web sites, such as Cars.com. Once you know the dealer's cost, negotiate a price as close to that as possible. To see the latest deals that others are getting, go to the Community tab at Edmunds.com and click on More Forums and then go to Pricing and Leasing. You can also check car forums at ConsumerReports.org. But keep in mind that you'll pay more for popular cars.

Don't mention that trade-in—yet! When you start negotiating, first focus on the price of the car. Once that's settled you can bring up your trade-in. That way a dealer can't mix up the car price and the trade-in, making it difficult for you to figure out whether you're getting a good deal. Also avoid discussing monthly payments and financing. That can lead to an overpriced long-term loan. If you need a loan, shop at banks and credit unions first.

Use e-mail to bargain. E-mail the model and specs you want to as many dealers in your area as possible. Ask them for their best price. And let them know you're comparing prices.

Another way to save Skip extended warranties by buying a reliable car. Our latest car-buyer surveys indicate that warranties are rarely worth it.

You CAN do it!

ShopSmart readers told us how they got discounts

50% requested discounts on damaged merchandise.

48% requested a price adjustment after things they bought went on sale.

41% requested discounts based on advertised prices at another store.

38% requested free delivery and/or installation.

38% always or often negotiate.

Contractors, doctors, and other service providers

TRUE STORY Saved: 50% When ShopSmart reader Nancy Winling went in for a blood test, she says her doctor agreed to cut the price in half if she paid on the spot. Wendy Grossmann says she always asks contractors, "Is there a cash discount?" They often knock off 10 percent, she says, because they don't want to wonder when they'll get paid.

The lesson Cash talks.

Also try this

- **When shopping for a contractor, use various bids as negotiating tools.** Ask a high bidder to explain what he offers that the low bidder does not, and vice versa.
- **Ask for the going rate.** If you're faced with medical bills not covered by insurance, ask what insurance or Medicare would have paid, which is likely to be much less than the amount billed to an individual. "Start there" and don't hesitate to negotiate, says Orly Avitzur, M.D., associate medical editor of Consumer Reports. In our ShopSmart reader survey, nearly a third of respondents said they had successfully negotiated lower medical bills.
- **Offer to make a big up-front payments on medical bills.** It can really sweeten and speed a deal. "They're always chasing people," says Kevin Flynn, president of HealthCare Advocates, which helps patients settle medical bills. "Cash up front helps."

Another way to save When it comes to prescriptions, opt for generics if possible, order your drugs online (to find reliable sites, go to *www.destinationrx.com),* and be sure to take advantage of discounts offered to members of alumni groups and clubs like AAA. To learn about the best drugs for many common conditions, go to *www.ConsumerReportsHealth.org* and then click on Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs for recommendations.

TVs, computers, and other electronics

TRUE STORY! Saved: 10% ShopSmart reader Kathleen Worley saw a camera marked down 50 percent at Target and noticed it was missing its box and a cord. She found a manager and said, "I really like this camera. Is there some way you could take more off?" Right away he said yes to an extra 10 percent off.

The lesson Use a flaw that doesn't bother you to get a better price.

Also try this

- **Come armed.** Don't leave for an electronics store without newspaper ads and printouts of the product information and prices you find online. Some stores may be willing to beat an online price. And most stores will match or beat a price in a newspaper ad. If you're at Best Buy, the company says you'll have to speak with a store manager to cut a deal.
- **Know what's hot and what's not.** It's easier to get a deal on product that may be last year's model or isn't a best-seller.
- **Save on accessories.** Once you've zoomed in on a well-priced TV or computer, focus on other stuff you'll need. If you're buying a flat-screen, ask for a break on installation, extra cables, or cleaning products. Often that's where the bigger markups—and greater wiggle room—lie.
- **Look around.** Check out items similar to the ones that are on sale. There's more room to bargain on these. Just remember that you'll have more haggling leverage if the advertised item is sold out.

Another way to save Skip the extended warranty. Most electronics will probably outlive the extended warranty period without a problem. And if there is a glitch after the manufacturer's warranty expires, the repair costs aren't likely to be much more than the amount you'd pay for extended coverage.

The **BEST TIMES** to buy

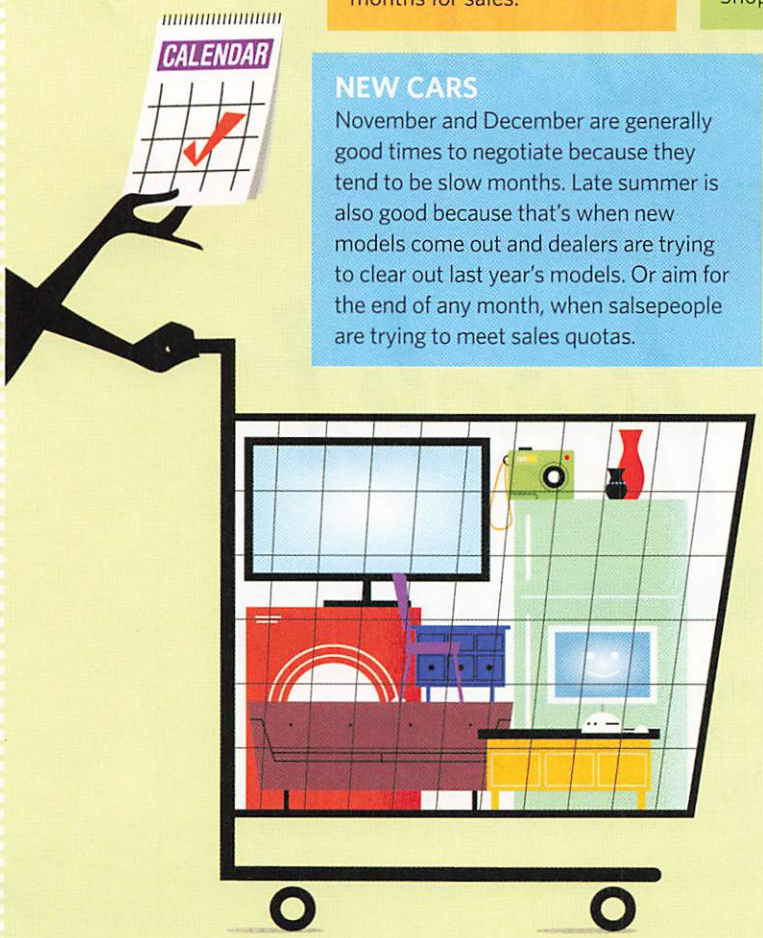
Knowing when to shop for certain items can boost your odds of finding great sales, and it can also give you leverage when you're looking to haggle.

JEWELRY
Bargain all year round for this highly marked-up item—except around the December holidays and before Valentine's Day.

COMPUTERS
July, before the back-to-school rush, and December are good months for sales.

DIGITAL CAMERAS
Shop in February and April.

CELL-PHONE PLANS
Shop around when it's time to renew your service plan and use your existing plan and competing offers as leverage.



NEW CARS
November and December are generally good times to negotiate because they tend to be slow months. Late summer is also good because that's when new models come out and dealers are trying to clear out last year's models. Or aim for the end of any month, when salsepeople are trying to meet sales quotas.

TVs
Shoot for the post-holiday lull in January or in March, after the Super Bowl rush.

HOUSES AND CONDOS
Start in February, before the spring home-buying season begins.

FURNITURE
Shop in February, before stores unpack their spring collections.

APPLIANCES
There are often sales in January, and stores are open to haggling in December, when other shoppers are busy preparing for the holidays. Fridges are one exception: In May and June the old ones must go out to make room for the new models, so that's the time to nab sales and get discounts.

Meet your haggling mentors

SOME OF THE NEGOTIATING EXPERTS AND HOW-TO GUIDES WE CONSULTED FOR THIS STORY:

Erica Dawson, assistant professor at the Yale School of Management; Chuck Thompson, travel writer and the author of "Smile When You're Lying"; Mary Greenwood, labor negotiator and consumer mediator; G. Richard Shell, professor at the Wharton School and an author of "The Art of Woo"; Michael Soon Lee, author of "Black Belt Negotiating"; Leonard Greenhalgh, professor at Dartmouth's Tuck School of Business; Bruce Newman, a former antiques dealer and author of "Don't Come Back Until You Find It"; Peter B. Stark and Jane Flaherty's book "The Only Negotiating Guide You'll Ever Need"; and Ed Brodow's book "Negotiation Boot Camp."

PLUS
A Safety Alert on plastic wraps and containers.
See p. 43

Keep it fresh!

Food-storage tricks that will keep everything in your fridge and pantry tasting great—and save you money at the supermarket

Odds are you've been using the same types of containers and wrap to store everything from leftover lasagna to deli meats for years. This is one kitchen chore most of us do on autopilot. But according to a group of top food-safety experts we spoke to, wrapping stuff for the fridge or freezer is trickier than you might think. Is there some moldy cheese in your fridge right now or ice crystals clinging to that pack of hamburger patties in the freezer? We thought so!

Wrapping your food or tossing it into a container isn't always enough to guard leftovers against two of the biggest spoilers, moisture and air, says Robert Gravani, professor of food science at Cornell University. He says a lot of good food goes to waste simply because people don't know how to handle it properly once they get it home from the store.

Even flour and other pantry staples in their own packaging can spoil, get buggy, or absorb odors from other foods. So if you've had it with throwing money away because stuff turns yucky before you can use it, maybe it's time to give your food-storing methods a makeover. Starting on the next page is a list of the top food-wasters and how to avoid them, according to food experts at the Department of Agriculture, the Food and Drug Administration, and food-science and cooperative extension programs at Cornell University and Penn State University, which answer consumers' food-storage questions day in and day out. We list which wraps and containers do the best job of protecting food, as well as a few with safety issues that you should probably skip.

Food on the loose

WHAT 1,000 WOMEN TOLD US IN A RECENT POLL ABOUT THEIR STORAGE HABITS

22
is the average number of plastic storage containers readers say they keep.

25%
of women say they eat just some or none of the leftovers they stick in the fridge.

23%
of women say they often argue with their families over whether food is OK to eat.

6%
of women say a family member has become ill from eating spoiled food at home.

WENDELL WEBBER; PROP STYLIST: JEFFSTYLES.COM

The 11 worst food-storage mistakes

READ THIS **BEFORE** YOUR NEXT TRIP TO THE GROCERY STORE

SLOPPY WRAPPING

Why it's bad Air and moisture—food's worst enemies—can seep in and let food-spoilers set up camp.

Easy fix Make sure lids and caps are on very tight. If you're storing food in a resealable bag, squeeze out as much air as possible before sealing it. If you're wrapping items in foil or freezer wrap, overlap seams and tape down "wings" to form a tight package. Some plastic wraps may not cling to plastic and metal bowls; create a tight seal with rubber bands.

NOT REMOVING STORE WRAP

Why it's bad The original plastic may look like it's on tight, but there may be tiny holes you can't see or a loose flap that exposes the contents to air.

Easy fix Rewrap supermarket meat, poultry, and cold cuts that come in flimsy wrapping, especially if you'll be storing those lamb chops or drumsticks a few days before using them. Remove meats from foam trays and clingy wrap before freezing and place them in resealable freezer bags or wrap tightly in heavy-duty foil or freezer paper. In addition to reducing spoilage, it may cut your exposure to chemical contaminants (see Safety Alert, page 43).

OVERSIZE CONTAINERS

Why they're bad Too much "headroom" speeds spoilage and freezer burn.

Easy fix Match the size of your container as closely as possible to the contents. There should be a minimum amount of headroom, or air, between the food and the lid; that goes for plastic bags too.

REUSING FOOD CONTAINERS

Why it's bad Margarine tubs, deli containers, cottage cheese and yogurt cartons, and other food containers are made for one-time use and may not hold up to wear and tear, freezer temps, or dishwashing. Plus these materials may not be safe for use in microwave ovens; if you heat leftovers in them, plastic may soften or melt and migrate into the food.

Easy fix Reusing freebie containers may not be a good idea for cooking, but you can still use them for dry pantry foods. However, you should watch for wear, which can let in air and moisture. When heating food in a microwave, only use microwave-safe cookware or containers.

INCORRECT FRIDGE TEMPS

Why they're bad If refrigerator or freezer temperatures are too warm, even by just a few degrees, food can spoil faster. Two signs temps are off: Milk sours before the sell-by date or ice cream is soft.

WENDELL WEBBER; PROP STYLIST: JEFFSTYLES.COM

Easy fix Keep the fridge set at 37° F and the freezer at 0° F. Many models are good at keeping temperatures steady, but get a thermometer and check each compartment. To get the best reading in the fresh food section, leave the thermometer in a glass or plastic container of water overnight. In the freezer, simply place a thermometer in the center of the main compartment.

FRIDGE-DOOR STORAGE

Why it's bad In our tests, fridge-door compartments were 3 to 5 degrees warmer than the shelves inside, closer to the spoilage danger zone, which starts at 41° F.

Easy fix Keep eggs (leave them in the carton), milk, and fresh deli condiments like salsa and pesto in the back of the fridge, where it's colder. You can keep the hardier, vinegar-based stuff like mustard, relish, and ketchup on the door.

REFRIGERATING RED-HOT LEFTOVERS

Why it's bad Hot food in the fridge will warm the food around it, increasing the rate of bacterial growth.

Easy fix Cool hot stuff before refrigerating. To cool a big pot of soup or chili, transfer it to smaller containers or plunge the pot into a sink of ice water, but get it into the fridge within 2 hours.

THE SNIFF TEST

Why it's bad A nasty odor is a good clue that food's spoiled, but food that doesn't smell can still make you sick.

Easy fix Pay attention to use-by dates on packaging. Also check for spoilage by looking at the food—a change in color or a filmy skin is a tip-off. With cold cuts and meats, do the touch test: If it feels slimy, out it goes. And don't forget—when in doubt, throw it out.

UNDERWRAPPING SMELLY STUFF

Why it's bad Some food smells can permeate right through the wrap. And really strong odors can spread throughout the entire fridge, so your butter, milk, and even the ice in the freezer can end up tasting like the leftover fish from last night. Some of the newest fridges we tested have dual evaporators that keep odors from drifting between the fridge and freezer, but older models don't have this feature.

Easy fix Make sure smelly stuff is sealed tight in containers. If you can smell the offending food through the wrap, wrap it again until you can't. As a safeguard, keep possible offenders away from milk, and other foods that can soak up odors. Eggs, for example, can absorb odors from onions.

LOSING TRACK OF LEFTOVERS

Why it's bad If you don't know how long leftovers have been sitting around, you can end up eating spoiled food.

Easy fix Label and date your containers so you'll know when to throw out what's in them. (Leftovers shouldn't hang around the fridge for more than three to four days; open deli meats for three to five days.) But remember to take inventory regularly. Frozen items should be checked too. Freezer burn doesn't mean that food has spoiled, but that it has dried out and may taste nasty.

WAREHOUSE OVERLOAD

Why it's bad You may have gotten a great deal on that party pack of steaks, but if the meat goes bad before you can use it, you're throwing money away.

Easy fix Repackage food into meal-size packages to avoid waste, and freeze what you can't use immediately, especially poultry and meats that should be eaten within one to two days. You can also freeze nuts, butter, and even flour.

Containers, bags, or wraps?

MAKE THE BEST FOOD-STORAGE CHOICES FOR THE JOB

What's the best way to protect food from air, moisture, odors, and other spoilers? If you're wrapping a sandwich for lunch, almost anything will do. But for longer stretches—a few days in the fridge or a few months in the freezer or pantry—you need something that forms a tight seal and a strong barrier against the environment. Here are some of your options:

Containers

What to look for Tight-fitting lids, sizes and shapes that are close to the size of the food items you're storing, and containers that stack to save space. Clear ones make it easier to see what's inside. Inspect containers for cracks and chips. Freezing can subject containers to tiny hairline cracks that let in air and moisture.

TIP It's OK to use disposable containers like Gladware more than once, but get rid of any that have wear marks or lose their seal.

Plastic bags

What to look for Resealable or zippered closures, a variety of sizes to fit the food you're storing, a place to write dates on the front of the bag, and thick plastic for freezer storage. (See page 44 for good alternatives to zippered bags.)

TIP Squeeze as much air out as possible before sealing. For added protection against freezer burn and air, double-bag food before storing. If you're using a bag with a twist tie, twist the bag around a few times and fold it over on itself at the top before securing it.

Vacuum-sealers

What to look for Ease of use and versatility. Some sealers suck all the air only from bags; some have hoses to remove air from containers. Vacuum bags are better than resealable bags for reducing freezer burn because foods don't come in contact with air.

WARNING! Botulism toxins can grow in places with little or no oxygen, such as vacuum-packed cans, jars,and bags. So always thoroughly heat frozen low-acid vacuum-packed meats and veggies before eating them.

Wraps

What to look for Those that will give you the best seal. Some plastic wraps are better than others at clinging to themselves and forming a good grip on bowls. Foil does a good job of keeping out moisture and odors. To create a tight seal on foods going into the freezer, wrap food in foil or laminated freezer paper and tape it shut with freezer tape. There's no way you can make a tight seal with wax paper, so it isn't a good choice for long-term storage.

WENDELL WEBBER; PROP STYLIST: JEFFSTYLES.COM

SAFETY alert

HOW SAFE IS THAT PLASTIC CONTAINER?

Though the Food and Drug Administration says that plastic food-storage containers and wraps made for home use are safe when used properly, we don't completely agree. Some of these plastics are the subject of a new debate that has researchers, consumer advocates, and folks like us asking questions about possible health risks. And there's growing scientific evidence to justify the concerns. In many studies, some common plastics have been found to contain potentially harmful chemicals that under certain conditions, such as high heat, might migrate from containers into food. The FDA's stance is that the amount of these chemicals that leach into food is within safe limits. But some scientists studying the chemicals, including Ana Soto, professor of cell biology at Tufts University, and Suzanne Snedeker, associate director of the Breast Cancer and Environmental Risk Factors Program at Cornell University, have found potential risks from even low levels of exposure. A new draft report from the National Institutes of Health has also raised concerns. Here's what you need to know about some problem plastics.

POLYVINYL CHLORIDE (PVC)

What it is PVC—used in some cling wraps you get at deli counters, some consumer plastic wraps, including Reynolds, plastic bottles and containers, and vinyl-lined lunch boxes—may contain chemicals called plasticizers that are added to make it flexible. The softer and more bendable the PVC plastic, the more likely it's made with plasticizers. They may be marked with the recycling number 3.

Possible health risks Some studies suggest that commonly used plasticizers in these products may cause cancer. They have also been linked to birth defects, and damage to the kidneys, lungs, and reproductive organs. When PVC touches food, especially hot or fatty items, it can leach these chemicals.

What you can do Grocery stores commonly use PVC plastic to wrap deli meats and cheeses, so you should rewrap those items to minimize leaching. If you microwave with plastic wrap, don't let the wrap touch your food or it can melt into your macaroni. Or use microwave-safe paper towels instead.

While shopping, we found lots of containers marked with recycling code 6, indicating a different group of plastics that may contain possible carcinogens, which can leach into your food.

POLYCARBONATE

What it is This clear rigid plastic is used in some food-storage containers, reusable sports bottles, 5-gallon water jugs, and baby bottles. To spot polycarbonate plastic, check for the recycling code 7 and/or the letters PC. We even found 7 codes on some Rubbermaid products.

Possible health risks The plastic contains bisphenol A (BPA), a chemical that mimics estrogen, which studies have linked to a number of ills including breast and prostate cancer, diabetes, birth defects, and child hyperactivity. Studies have shown that BPA can migrate into food and beverages if containers and bottles are exposed to heat or are scratched, cracked, or worn from repeated use and dishwashing. BPA can also be found in some food-can liners. The NIH's new report highlights research pointing to potential adverse health effects in fetuses and children.

What you can do Avoid containers with a 7 recycling code and any unmarked clear plastic containers. Use products made of BPA-free polyethylene or polypropylene marked with the recycling numbers 2, 4, or 5. Or consider other materials that are marked microwave-safe, such as glass.

POLYCARBONATE: WENDELL WEBBER; PROP STYLIST: JEFFSTYLES.COM

Keep it crunchy

Quick Seals is a new plastic food-storage product that lets you add a zip closure to any opened bag or box of food by applying a zip slider with adhesive strips. To see if it keeps food fresher than zippered storage bags, we pitted it against two sizes of Glad and Ziploc storage bags filled with crackers and chips. We also tried it against clips on open bags of chips. After five weeks, here's what we found.

	Quick Seals	Glad	Ziploc	clip
COST	20 cents per bag	6 to 8 cents per qt./gal. bag	10 to 14 cents per qt./gal. bag	$2.50
FLAVOR	Yum!	A bit stale	A bit stale	Yum!
TEXTURE	Crunchy	Less crunchy	Less crunchy	Crunchy
EFFORT	A little tricky getting it on the package	No problem	No problem	No problem

THE BOTTOM LINE
Go with clips for your crackers and cookies. They'll keep your food fresher than plastic bags, and they're reusable so they create less waste.

We also checked out...

Reynold's Handi-Vac Vacuum Sealer

About $10 plus cost of bags

What our testers found This vacuum-sealer takes a bit of effort, but it's cheap and does a great job of sucking air from freezer bags to reduce freezer burn. Unlike most vacuum bags, these can be opened to remove food and resealed without cutting the bag.

Sharper Image FresherLonger

$50 (12 pieces)

What our testers found
They kept food fresh, but they remained stained after washing. And they're nearly twice the price of the Lock & Lock containers, right.

Heritage Lock & Lock

$30 (17 pieces)

What our testers found For about half the cost of the FresherLonger set at left, these containers kept stored food just as well in our tests. Unfortunately, they remained stained, even after washing.

CHIPS: WENDELL WEBBER; PROP STYLIST: JEFFSTYLES.COM

TIPS FOR STORING HARD-TO-KEEP FOODS

Bread It can go stale or get moldy left out on a counter or stored in the fridge. If you're not going to eat it fast, you can keep bread in the freezer for up to three months. To refresh thawed baguettes, rolls, and other breads, unwrap and heat them in the microwave for a few seconds.

Brown sugar It can get as hard as a rock because of moisture loss during storage. Storing it in an airtight container will help keep moisture in. If you've already got hardened sugar, heat it in a 250° F oven until it's soft and use it right away or it will turn rock-solid again, fast.

Butter All fats are fragile and can go rancid. To preserve freshness, wrap and freeze what you don't use; unsalted butter will last about four to five months, salted butter, about six to nine.

Cheese When it comes to storing cheese, we found conflicting advice. Fancy cheese shops advise storing it in a porous wrap like wax paper so the cheese can breathe. The dairy and packaging pros we spoke to said to take a tip from how supermarket cheeses are packaged and keep cheese as airtight as possible, which will prevent mold. Our advice: Wrap it first in wax paper, then wrap it tightly in plastic.

Cooking oil Buy oil in opaque or dark containers if possible and store it in a cool, dark place to protect it from damaging light. Buy only what you can use within three to six months—or one month for very fragile walnut and other nut oils. Like all fats, oil can go rancid, giving recipes an off flavor. If you're not using it fast enough, keep the oil in the fridge. Since oil congeals when it gets cold, bring it to room temperature before using.

Crackers Crackers and chips can get soggy fast if they're not sufficiently protected in a humid environment. So be sure to wrap the package in an airtight container or use a plastic clip or Quick Seals. (See "Keep It Crunchy" at left.)

Whole-wheat flour Unlike white flour, whole-wheat flour (also wheat germ, brown rice, and other whole-grain foods) contains higher levels of fat that gives it a brief one- to three-month shelf life. If you use whole grain ingredients only occasionally, they'll keep about six months in the fridge and 12 months in the freezer. (Yes, you can freeze flour!)

Ground meat It'll keep one to two days in the fridge. After that, put it in the freezer. For the best flavor and texture, use frozen ground meat within three months.

Ice cream To prevent ice crystals from forming, keep the surface of ice cream level and cover it with plastic wrap before putting the lid back on.

Nuts and seeds To protect them from going rancid, store them in the fridge; they'll last up to six months. In the freezer they'll last up to 12 months. Keep them in airtight, snack- or recipe-size portions so you can thaw only what you want to use. Toasting refrigerated or thawed nuts in a skillet or the oven for a few minutes will bring out the flavor.

Powdered sugar Because it can absorb odors from spices, and any strong flavored foods around it, keep it in an airtight container.

Spices Ground spices typically have a two-to-three-year shelf life, but light, heat, and moisture can cause them to lose their oomph much faster. Keep them airtight in a dark place, away from sunlight, the heat of the stove, and heat-generating lighting—and not near the sink. Properly stored, whole spices will last longer than ground.

Tea If stored next to spices and other strong-flavored foods, tea can absorb these flavors, which can affect its taste. So store tea in air-tight containers, away from smelly foods.

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52 Green dreams
Our pros spill their care and upkeep secrets for lusher, healthier lawns. Also, find your perfect mower match.

57 Don't sweat it
Quick fixes for clammy basements, bathrooms, and closets. Plus how to shop for a dehumidifer.

WENDELL WEBBER; PROP STYLIST: JEFFSTYLES.COM

Perfect palette

The cheapest way to a fresh look is paint. Here's how to pick great color combos with confidence, plus the best paints we tested.

57 TESTED

15 SMART PICKS

Choosing a wall color is tough when all you have to go on is a thumb-size paint chip or a few brush strokes on a wall. And it's not just the walls you have to worry about. There's the ceiling, trim, fireplace mantel, and any other details you might want to highlight—not to mention the bad ones you'd like to hide. So it may take more than one color to give a room a lift.

But before you go crazy testing a million color combos or take the easy way out and paint everything white, do as the experts do and stick to just three hues. Many pros choose the wall color first. "Usually one color is proportionately used the most—the leading lady—and the others play supporting roles," says Leslie Harrington, executive director of the Color Association of the United States.

Though Harrington likes to say that there are no wrong color combinations, you can be more confident that the palette you choose will work by using some tried-and-true designer tricks. Check them out below. After you've nailed down a palette, turn to page 50 to see which wall and trim paints performed best in our tests.

NATURAL-BORN COLORS Looking at color combos in nature can help you pick a pretty room palette.

1 PICK A PERFECT COLOR COMBO

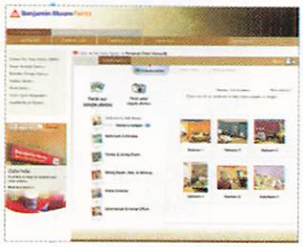
Look to Mother Nature for inspiration. "She's the master of great combinations," Harrington says. A faded rose in the garden, a pale-blue sky, or a bright-white pebble could be the starting point for an entire palette. Of course, you can find inspiration anywhere—a trio of hues in a favorite rug, a painting, or a piece of upholstery fabric can point you to some great color combinations.

Give a neutral scheme some depth. Love white, beige, or taupe? Even whites and neutrals come in a variety of shades. Use one color on the walls, another on the ceiling, and a third on the trim to

TRENDY TRIO From top, French Violet 1427, Aegean Teal 2136-40, and Ferret Brown 2108-10 from Benjamin Moore.

PAINT BY MOUSE CLICKS

Will bubble-gum-pink walls go with lime-green trim? You can get a free quick preview by clicking on the sites of some paint companies, including *www.behr.com, www.benjaminmoore.com, www.glidden.com, and www.valspar.com*. They all work basically the same way. Click on an image of a sample room and play around with color combos for the walls, trim, and accent areas. The Behr and Benjamin Moore sites let you flow these colors into your own digital photo. Though you won't be able to see how lighting and your own furnishings affect the way the colors will look in real life, it's still a great way to test-drive color combinations without lifting a brush.



MAKE A ROOM POP From top, Peacock Feathers 724, Split Pea 2146-30, and Gypsy Pink 2077-20 from Benjamin Moore.

create a rich interplay of hues, says Dylan Landis, author of "Elegant and Easy Rooms" (Dell, 1997).

- **Stick to the classics.** Certain color palettes are timeless. Some can't-go-wrong combos are light blue and brown, cream and brown, or burgundy and hunter green for living areas; red and gold or navy and white in the dining room; and citrusy shades and white or blue and crisp white in the kitchen.

- **Go with the latest color trends.** This year's popular palettes include subtle variations on lavender, teal, and brown (shown left) and hotter schemes of pink, green, and blue (shown above). If you really want to add drama, take a bolder approach and team oranges and reds or blues and greens. Different shades of the same color will often work together.

2 COORDINATE WALLS AND TRIM

GO WITH THE FLOW Paint trim throughout the house the same color to tie it all together.

- **Make it pop.** The lightest color in a room will catch the eye, so white trim against darker walls and ceilings will really stand out. This is a great way to showcase pretty details like a fireplace mantel or decorative molding.

- **Blend it in.** Mixing a bit of the wall color into white trim paint is an old decorator's trick, Landis says. Use it on the ceiling too. You'll barely see the tint, but the softened contrast will make the room appear seamless.

- **Keep the trim consistent.** If you change colors from room to room, use the same shade of white on ceilings and trim throughout the house. It will keep all the rooms related to one another.

- **Use contrast.** Low-contrast color schemes, such as light walls against a white ceiling and trim, create a sense of borderless space that can make a room appear airier. Painting a low ceiling a light shade will give it a visual lift. But high-contrast schemes, such as dark walls against a white ceiling and trim, have a shrinking effect that can make a room feel cozier and more intimate. Warm hues like deep reds, pinks, and golds are great for increasing the cozy factor.

- **Hide room flaws.** The more you saturate a room with the same color, the less attention flaws will draw. So a good, cheap way to camouflage skimpy baseboards or visible plumbing or ducts is to paint them the same color as the walls. Whatever shade you use, opt for a flat or low-sheen finish or you'll risk highlighting the problem instead.

WOMAN: PM IMAGES/STONE/GETTYIMAGES; TOP RIGHT: RICHARD LEO JOHNSON/BEATWORKS/CORBIS

3 BUY THE BEST PAINT

There's only one basic rule when buying paint: Pick the right product for the job. To help you find the best choice, our experts ran dozens of paints through lots of tests to measure hiding power, stain resistance, surface smoothness, and other characteristics. Here's what they found:

best for one-coat coverage

Behr satin, flat, or semigloss
Price per gallon
$22-$25
Where to get it
Home Depot

Dutch Boy Home satin and flat
Price per gallon
$15-$17
Where to get it
Wal-Mart

Kilz Casual Colors satin and flat
Price per gallon
$18-$19
Where to get it
Wal-Mart

Why we like them They all had reasonably good coverage with one coat, especially when a darker color was painted over a lighter one. You'll still need to clean the walls with soap and water first, but these paints can save you time.

best overall values

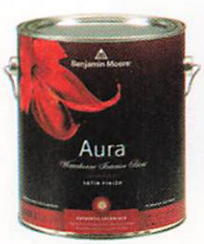
Behr Premium Plus Flat Enamel
Price per gallon
$22
Where to get it
Home Depot

Kilz Casual Colors
Price per gallon
$19
Where to get it
Wal-Mart

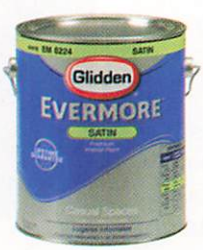
Why we like them The low-luster and flat Kilz gave a smooth finish and resisted stains and scrubbing. And cleaning didn't dull the gloss finish, which makes it especially good for high-traffic areas. The flat Behr is a consistently good paint.
Bummer The high sheen dulled on the Kilz semigloss when cleaned, so use it only on low-traffic trim, windows, and doors that won't need a lot of cleaning.

best for eco-friendliness

Why we like them These paints scored well in our tests and they're low in volatile organic compounds, or VOCs. Those chemicals can release potentially carcinogenic fumes, and cause headaches, dizziness, and other ailments. The federal government caps the VOC content of paint at 250 grams per liter (g/l) for flat finishes and 380 g/l for others. Some manufacturers comply with the tougher VOC regulations set by California. All three of these paints contain less than 50 g/l of VOCs. Paint VOC levels are printed on the cans.



Benjamin Moore Aura Satin
Price per gallon $55
Where to get it
Independent paint stores



Glidden Evermore Satin
Price per gallon $20
Where to get it
Home Depot

True Value E-Z Kare Satin
Price per gallon $23
Where to get it
True Value, independent retailers

Painting a home to sell? Think white!

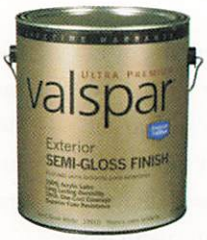
"Most people don't have an imagination to see another color that goes with their furniture on the walls. And buyers don't want to have to repaint," says Barb Schwarz, president of the International Association of Home Staging Professionals, based in Concord, Calif. Pale colors make rooms seem as if they flow into one another and make a house look more spacious (ka-ching!). "Dark colors will chop up a house," Schwarz says. The one place you can take a risk is a guest bathroom. "It can carry off strong, bold colors because it's already small."

LIVING LARGE An all-white scheme makes a space feel larger.

best for sunny rooms

Glidden Evermore Satin
Price per gallon $20
Where to get it
Home Depot

Olympic Premium Flat
Price per gallon $17
Where to get it
Lowe's



Valspar Ultra Premium Semigloss
Price per gallon $25
Where to get it
Lowe's

Why we like them Fading is an issue for most paint, but these should hold up well in a room that gets a lot of sun, like a sunroom.

PAINTING DO'S AND DON'TS

DO paint in order. Start with the ceiling, then do the walls, working from top to bottom. Do the trim last.

DON'T use cheap brushes and rollers. They could leave behind bristles and fibers and won't distribute paint evenly. A synthetic-bristle brush is best for latex paint, and a natural-bristle brush is best for oil paint. Buy a synthetic-fiber, seamless roller with a short nap (the fuzzy part); a quarter-inch is best for smooth plaster, wood, and metal surfaces.

DON'T overload the roller. If it slides or smears against the surface, there's too much paint that might spatter.

DO stay within the lines. Use painter's tape to mask doors, windows, and trim that will not be painted.

DON'T forget to protect your stuff. Cover the floor with a plastic drop cloth. Secure the edges with painter's tape. Remove outlet cover plates and protect switches, doorknobs, and light fixtures with plastic shopping or garbage bags.

DO be neat. Keep a moist rag on hand to wipe up drips and spatters.

WHITE ROOM: © PIETER ESTERSOHN/BEATEWORKS/CORBIS; ROLLER: PULP/PHOTODISC/GETTYIMAGES

Fast lawn shape-up

Speedy solutions for greener grass, fewer weeds, and more time for you! Plus what we found out about lawn services can save you a bundle.

FIELD OF GREENS Mowing and fertilizing right can cut down on yard work.

45 TESTED

4 SMART PICKS

We know you'd rather be lounging by a pool than sweating over your lawn, so we asked our experts this: How can you get gorgeous green grass without too much fuss? Here's their no-sweat (well, maybe a little sweat) plan to help you spend less time tending your yard and more time kicking back and enjoying it.

First, you need the right gear, including a mower or tractor with sharp blades. Some of the newest models we tried out at our six-acre Florida test site offer smooth cutting, easy starting, automatic mulching, and rear-wheel drive, which boosts traction so you don't have to struggle uphill. (See our Smart Picks, page 54.) Unfortunately, the mower that seemed likely to save you the most sweat—a robotic machine that works like a Roomba for your grass—turned out to pose a potential safety hazard. (See page 55.)

And if your yard could use some professional help, check out our tips for hiring a lawn service on page 56. You'll also learn what our landscape experts found when we had four national chains assess the yards of three staffers. For one thing, they got contradictory advice, and prices were all over the map. some of them are worth the money, but some aren't.

Now get back to that hammock!

MICHAEL COGLIANTRY/GETTY IMAGES

BEFORE YOU START YOUR ENGINES...

Make these steps part of your lawn-care routine to avoid yardwork overload

■ **EVERY FEW YEARS test the soil.** This is the best way to find out exactly what your lawn needs. Many pros do it yearly, but every few years is OK unless your lawn looks bad. You'll get more accurate results and better advice from a professional lab than you will from do-it-yourself test kits, which our pros found to be mostly unreliable. For about $20, your local cooperative extension service (go to *www.extension.org)* will measure pH levels and nutrients like phosphorus and potassium. It will also give you instructions for treatment. All you have to do is collect about a pint of soil from your yard and send it in.

■ **THREE TO FIVE TIMES A YEAR treat your grass to slow-release fertilizer.** For warm season grasses in warmer climates fertilize in the spring, then again in July or August. For cool season grasses in cooler climates fertilize once in the late spring and once or twice more from late summer into fall.

■ **EVERY SPRING put mulch bark around trees, flower beds, and walkways** to keep grass at bay and make edging easier.

■ **EVERY TIME YOU MOW wear long pants (to keep the ticks and mosquitoes away), boots (to protect your toes from the mower), and hearing protection.** Most mowers, including all of the best models we tested, produce more than 85 decibels—enough to damage your hearing over time.

Our easy 3-step plan

1 MOW LIKE A PRO

■ **Aim high.** Mow every five to 10 days and don't cut the grass shorter than 2½ to 3½ inches high. This keeps it strong and healthy with deeper roots and fewer weeds and pest problems. To set the mower at the right grass height, place it on a flat surface, like a garage floor, and set the blade at 2½ to 3½ inches. Most new mowers require you to adjust each wheel; use a ruler to get the right height.

■ **Mulch as you mow.** Leaving clippings returns useful nutrients to your lawn, cuts the amount of fertilizer it needs, and saves raking. Just be sure to set up your mower or tractor in the "mulch" mode so that instead of spewing long clippings out the side that have to be raked up, the machine will chop them up into tiny pieces and release them back into the grass, where they will eventually disappear.

■ **Mow in a row.** To avoid uncut strips, mow back and forth, creating slightly overlapping lanes.

2 KEEP IT TIDY

■ **Polish the cut.** Don't forget to trim around trees, posts, and other scruffy areas that the mower can't reach. The best and fastest way to do this is with a string trimmer. For easy handling, choose a light, electric trimmer with a top-mounted motor for better balance. Our testers especially liked the **Black & Decker GH1000, $70,** because the head swivels for easy edging. **TIP** To keep from tripping over the cord, loop it through the back of your belt.

■ **Trim right.** For the best control, tip the head at a 15-degree angle as you work.

3 WATER IT RIGHT

■ **Start early.** The morning is the best time to use sprinklers, before it gets too hot and moisture evaporates. Night watering can cause damaging mold and fungus to grow in your lawn.

■ **Give it a good soaking.** Long soaks encourage roots to spread down, which helps maintain grass health. Aim for an inch of water a week, including rainfall. Gauge how long your sprinklers should run by placing a few empty 1-inch-deep tuna cans around the lawn. Run the sprinklers for 20 minutes, then check the depth of the water in the cans. If they're filled up, it should take around 20 minutes to give the lawn a 1-inch drink. If they're not full, add a bit more time.

■ **Don't ignore trees and shrubs.** If you keep them pruned and mulched, they'll pay you back by providing nice shady spots for loafing.

A GREENER GREEN

Having lush and healthy grass isn't just pretty, it's good for the environment. Grass filters rainwater to prevent flooding, sponges up dust and soot, and helps to cool the area surrounding your house on a blistering hot day.

TIME-SAVING MACHINES

Match the mower style to your lawn for quicker, better cutting

easy riders

Lawn tractors are best for yards of half an acre or more. Most mow a swath 42 to 48 inches wide and can accept attachments such as snow throwers.
Price $1,000 to $2,800; $2,700 to $3,500 for models with tight turning

SMART PICK

Craftsman 28724
Price $1,500
Why we like it The 46-inch deck saves time by gobbling more grass with each pass. Also, it's easy to handle and costs about half as much as the most expensive tractor we tested. It's a good mulcher with special blades, which cost $50 extra.
Where to get it Sears

tight turners

Zero-turn-radius mowers are best for flat lawns on half an acre or more with trees and other obstacles. All have rear-wheel steering for tight turns and easy reversing. But they can lose traction and become hard to control on hills.
Price $2,300 to $4,500

SMART PICK

Toro TimeCutter Z4200
Price $2,500
Why we like it It gives you super-tight turning and a 42-inch-wide, grass-eating deck. But the twin control levers take time to master.
Where to get it Home Depot, Toro dealers

grass gliders

Power mowers are best for lawns that are less than half an acre. Self-propelled gas models are best for hills; electrics have push-button starting, quiet running, no exhaust fumes, and don't need tune-ups. But mobility is limited by the cord or how long the battery keeps its charge.
Price $150 to $800 (gas); $200 to $450 (electric)

SMART PICKS

Toro Recycler 20066 (gas)
Price $350
Why we like it It's great at mulching grass and cuts nearly as well as much pricier, comparable mowers we tested.
Where to get it Home Depot, Toro dealers

Homelite UT13122 (cordless electric)
Price $300
Why we like it This one is easy to use and costs $100 less than comparable mowers.
Where to get it Home Depot

MOW OFF THE POUNDS!

For every half-hour you spend pushing a mower, your body burns about 200 calories (for a 166-pound adult).

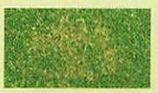
:(NOT SO HOT

Push mowers

New versions of manual reel mowers may be quieter and less complicated than power mowers—not to mention more eco-friendly—but the ones we tested didn't make the cut: The **$380 Brill Mantis 811073** cropped grass too short. Using the **$90 Bully Luxe 38 15050** was a shoving match. And the **$120 Scotts 2000-20S** (shown below) left uncut strips behind. A better pick: the Homelite electric mower UT13122, at left, which makes it easier to be green.

Quick fixes for common lawn spoilers

Try these tricks to keep pests away

Spoiler	Thrives in	What to do
Crabgrass	Lawns that are underfertilized and mowed too short	Apply corn gluten meal, a natural preventive and fertilizer sold at hardware stores. Keep good grass fertilized, watered, and mowed high.
Dandelions	Thin lawns with too little fertilizer	Pull or kill the entire root before the flowers mature and spread their seeds or the plant will resprout.
Fungus 	Lawns that are overwatered, improperly mowed, and fertilized at the wrong time of year	Look for causes and try remedies before the grass begins to die. Replant the dead areas.
Moss	Lawns that are shady or are underfertilized, with acidic, compacted, or wet soil	Reseed very shady areas with shade-tolerant grasses and mow them high to maximize the light-trapping surface.

SAFETY alert

Don't buy it! LawnBott LB3200 Evolution

A robotic mower that roves around by itself may seem like a tempting way to save time. But our tests show that the $2,500 LawnBott LB3200 Evolution poses a safety risk. Its blade kept spinning for as long as 4 seconds after we lifted the machine high enough to easily reach in and touch its sharp edges—something you or a curious child might inadvertently do. We also tested another robotic mower that didn't have safety issues but flubbed our performance tests. The $2,000 Friendly Robotics RoboMower RL1000 sometimes got stuck in the grass and didn't return to its charger. And it did an unimpressive job cutting the lawn. The bottom line: Sorry, but there's no free ride when it comes to mowing. Just think of those weekly sessions as calorie-burning workouts.

CRABGRASS: © HOLT STUDIOS INTERNATIONAL LTD./ALAMY; DANDELION: JUPITERIMAGES; FUNGUS: © HOLT STUDIOS INTERNATIONAL LTD./ALAMY; MOSS: DORLING KINDERSLEY/GETTY IMAGES

WHAT ABOUT LAWN SERVICES?

Ugly bald spots or stubborn weedy patches dotting your lawn? Maybe it's time to call in a professional lawn service, but which one? To help you figure that out, we asked three staffers with problem lawns to go through the consultation process with four big national chains: **Lawn Doctor, Scotts, TruGreen,** and **NaturaLawn.** Then we asked two top turf experts—Keith Karnok from the Department of Crop and Soil Sciences at the University of Georgia and Martin Petrovic from the Department of Horticulture at Cornell University—to evaluate the advice we got. Though all the lawn service companies provide weeding, fertilizing, and pest control, they differ in cost and expertise. And if you want your lawn mowed and watered regularly, don't look to them. Most of these outfits only diagnose and treat lawn problems—don't forget, they're in the business to sell fertilizer and other cures. Here's what else we learned.

1 SHOP AROUND. Despite claims about tailored and specialized programs, we found that the prescriptions were a lot alike. But costs varied. They ranged from $250 for TruGreen's six-visit weeding and fertilizing to $990 for Lawn Doctor's annual program of fertilziing, weeding, pest control, lime application, aeration, and seeding. For another $250, TruGreen includes aeration, seeding, and pest control. Scotts was the only company that based fees on lawn size, so the same $360, 10-treatment plan quoted for our small lawns would have cost $930 for our largest lawn.

2 GET A CONTRACT. TruGreen's written contract did not state which pesticides would be used, but Scotts', and NaturaLawn's did. Before signing up, get a written contract that spells out the terms and conditions of the service being provided and the products to be used.

3 INSIST ON A SOIL TEST. That's key to determining which fertilizers to use and how much your lawn needs, or you could end up paying for unnecessary treatments. Though most of the companies did an initial lawn analysis by eyeballing the grass, NaturaLawn was the only company that measured the soil's pH. TruGreen sent an estimate to one of our homeowners without even seeing the lawn. A technician from the same company recommended a lime application even though our independent soil test indicated that no lime was needed.

4 CHECK THE KNOW-HOW OF YOUR TECH. Some companies put their technicians through extensive training, but local franchises don't always have the same standards. Ask if the technician is from a franchise or a company-owned branch—it may make a difference in his or her expertise. We found that technicians from one company, Scotts, accurately identified some turf problems but overstated others, which could have resulted in charges for unnecessary services.

5 ASK ABOUT NATURAL CHEMICALS. We found conflicting advice on pesticides. A brochure may list chemicals that can be used during treatment, but talk to the technician. In our experience, the two views didn't always mesh. Technicians from Scotts and Lawn Doctor told us that some of their organic treatments didn't work as well as their conventional treatment. And both companies, as well as NaturaLawn, used pesticides that the Environmental Protection Agency lists as possible carcinogens. There are no national government standards for organic lawn care. Go to *www.epa.gov/greenscapes* for tips and information.

Summer comfort

A dehumidifier can keep your house comfy and mold-free. Here's what to buy and, just as important, where to put it.

17 TESTED
3 SMART PICKS

Your living room might be cool with the A/C going, but your basement, bathroom, and other hot spots might still feel uncomfortably clammy. Summertime humidity is most likely the problem, especially if the room smells dank and musty. The easy solution is one of our top tested dehumidifiers.

These boxy appliances aren't small—they take up about as much space as a mini fridge. And they can be noisy and generate heat. But by sucking moisture out of the air, they not only make your rooms more comfortable, but they can also prevent health problems. Over time, humidity levels above 50 percent can breed mildew, dust mites, and mold, which exacerbate allergies and asthma. Mildew and mold can also ruin furnishings and grow on clothes, books, and stuff stashed in the basement.

And if water seeps into your walls, watch out. It could cause serious structural damage. But before buying a dehumidifier,

heavy-duty

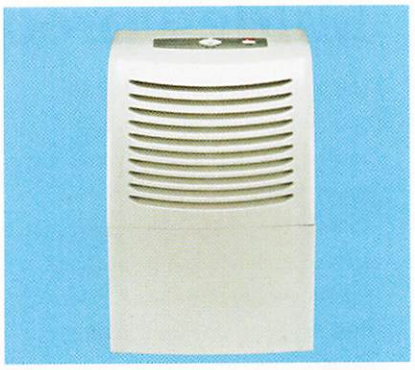
Best for large wet spaces

Danby DDR606
Price $250
Why we like it It removed more moisture from the air than any other unit we tested—up to 60 pints a day. It was also the most energy-efficient model. It has easy-to-read controls, choice of a bucket or continuous drain through a hose, and a control that turns off the compressor when frost forms on the coils.
Bummer You have to restart it manually after a power failure.
Where to get it Online retailers

a quiet one

Best for damp or wet spaces

LG LHD45EBL
Price $200
Why we like it This midsized unit removes up to 38 pints of water a day. It's got a lot of the same features as the Danby, at left, including easy-to-read controls, a timer, and bucket or hose connections. Plus it's quiet and it passed our blackout test.
Where to get it Home Depot, independent retailers



bargain buy

Best for small damp spaces

Haier HD306
Price $140
Why we like it It can remove about 25 to 30 pints of water in a day, making it a good choice for small spaces like bathrooms. Plus it passed our blackout test.
Bummers It's not a good choice for large rooms. Also, small models are less efficient, requiring almost twice as many watts to suck a pint of water from the air as larger units.
Where to get it Target, independent retailers

try these two things first:

■ **Look for the cause.** Cooking, laundering, and taking long showers without good room ventilation pump moisture into the air. An exhaust fan can pump it out. Fix leaks in basement walls and floors, make sure your clothes dryer is vented to the outside, and extend outside downspouts that aren't carrying rainwater far enough from your home's foundation.

■ **Dry the air.** If you have dampness in a small area like a linen closet or storage space, try using chemical desiccants (see below for more information) found at hardware stores.

If you decide to buy a dehumidifier, see our Smart Picks on page 57. We tested 17 models, including those from well-known brands like GE, Kenmore, LG, DeLonghi, and Whirlpool, to see how well they removed moisture from a humidity-controlled room. We also put the machines through our blackout test to see if they'd restart on their own after a power failure (12 did, including two of our picks). We also scored them on noise—not a big deal if you're putting it in the basement but something to think about if you're using it in the bedroom. Also consider our tips at right before you shop.

Mildewproof a closet

The last place you want to be a breeding ground for mold and mildew is a clothes or linen closet, where there's often no airflow. Pamela Turner, assistant professor and extension housing specialist at the University of Georgia, offers these suggestions for keeping your closets clean and dry:

DON'T STORE ANYTHING THAT'S DAMP. Wait for those sheets or clothes to dry out fully.

DRY IDEA A bucket of DampRid can help dry out closets where there's not enough space or airflow for a dehumidifier.

DE-CLUTTER THE SPACE. The more stuff crammed in, the less air can circulate around clothes; air movement helps remove moisture.

INSTALL LOUVERED DOORS. The open slats promote air circulation which helps prevent moisture buildup.

USE A DESICCANT. Try moisture-absorbing chemicals like silica—the stuff in the packets found inside new shoes or a handbag—or an anhydrous calcium-chloride-based product like DampRid from a hardware store. Silica feels dry even when saturated but can absorb its weight in water. DampRid's water-absorbent crystals dissolve as they soak up dampness from the surrounding air. Neither will do the job of a dehumidifier, but they can help keep a small area dry.

SHOPPING TIPS

1 BIGGER CAPACITY IS USUALLY BETTER.

Large-capacity models are more expensive, but they often work faster and more efficiently than smaller units, which is especially important in large or high-humidity spaces. Less expensive, smaller-capacity models, which are just as bulky, might be all you need in a small spot.

TIP You can put side-venting units along walls, but back-venting models need at least 12 inches of clearance from walls or furniture for proper airflow.

2 CHECK ENERGY EFFICIENCY TO SAVE ON UTILITY BILLS.

Depending on where you live, your dehumidifier might end up running much of the day every day, which can jack up your utility bill. So look for models with the Energy Star seal. They are 10 to 20 percent more efficient than other units.

TIP A model with a timer can save money because you can set it to run overnight during cheaper off-peak electricity hours.

3 LOOK FOR DEALS.

New models come out in late spring and early summer, and most sales and in-store promotions occur from June through August. You might also find closeout deals in the fall and early winter.

IMAGESOURCE/JUPITERIMAGES

health & fitness

what's inside

60 Fly the unqueasy skies
Don't let motion sickness spoil a fun trip. Know the triggers and cures—good for land, sky, and sea.

61 Carsickness cures
Whether you're driving a mile to the mall or clear across the country, the best ways to keep kids happy and nausea-free.

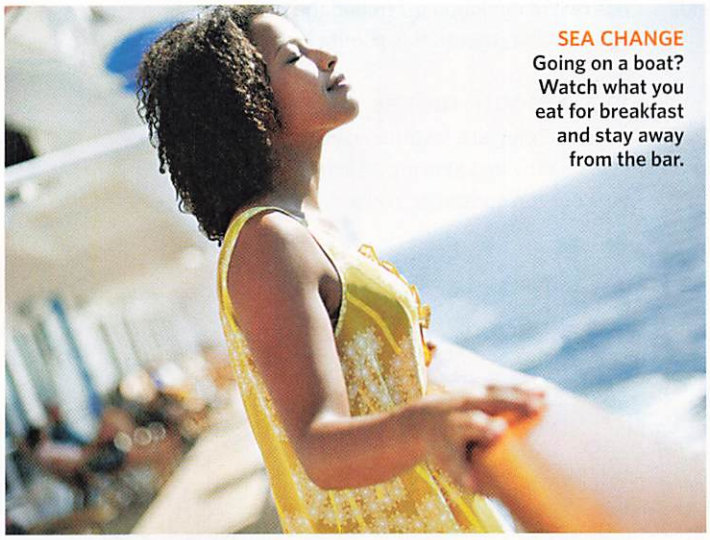
62 Bare necessities
We spent weeks getting our leg hairs yanked out (we're not kidding!) to find the best ways to keep skin smooth this summer.

63 Smooth moves
A dermatologist's favorite ways to keep skin healthy and glowing all summer long. Plus our top sunscreen picks.

WENDELL WEBBER; PROP STYLIST: JEFFSTYLES.COM

Motion sickness fixes

Don't let a queasy stomach ruin your next cruise, road trip, or flight



SEA CHANGE Going on a boat? Watch what you eat for breakfast and stay away from the bar.

Planes, trains, boats, and automobiles can quickly turn into roving torture chambers when motion sickness kicks in. Some folks are more susceptible than others, but most travelers get hit with it sooner or later. Here's what to bring along when you take to the road this summer, so you can enjoy your lunch—and avoid losing it.

First, the one piece of good news about motion sickness: If you're traveling with infants, you probably won't have to worry about them. Children rarely get motion sickness before age 2. But as kids grow up they become increasingly susceptible. The worst years are usually between the ages of 4 and 10. Women are more often affected than men, especially when they are pregnant, menstruating, or taking birth-control pills. Also, migraine sufferers appear to be more prone to motion sickness.

So what causes that queasy feeling? "Motion sickness is often a disconnect between what the eyes see and the body feels," says Paul Gahlinger, M.D., adjunct professor of medicine at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City and a pilot. You get seasick below deck in a boat because the appearance that nothing is moving doesn't jibe with the sensation of motion felt by your inner ear. "One way to right yourself is to focus on a visible horizon," says Gahlinger. Go on deck and focus on the point where waves meet sky; in a car, look at passing scenery. "If you can't do that, minimize the brain disconnect by lying down or reclining and closing your eyes."

Nausea by the numbers

No, you're not lame if you get motion sickness every time you set foot on a boat. Motion sickness has plagued travelers through the ages. In fact, the word "nausea" is derived from the Greek word *naus*, for ship. Here are a few stats that should make you feel better:

58% of children get carsick. Luckily, many outgrow it.

50% of shuttle astronauts (and they're professionals!) get spacesick.

29% of airline pilots have been incapacitated by airsickness.

100% of a ship's passengers could get seasick in rough waters.

First, try these:

GINGER AND WRISTBANDS

Although far from proven, these are safe and worth a shot, especially for mild symptoms. **Ginger root**, typically sold in candies and capsules, has the most supporting evidence. Occasional use of up to 250 milligrams four times a day is considered safe for most people, including women who might be pregnant. Bracelets such as **Sea-Bands**, found at drugstores, stimulate acupressure points on the wrist and have been shown to combat nausea in some situations. The evidence that they work against motion sickness is mixed. However, they're safe and can be used along with other remedies.

WOMAN: RANDYFARIS/CORBIS/JUPITERIMAGES

Next, try this:

ANTIHISTAMINES

Older over-the-counter antihistamines such as **dimenhydrinate** (Dramamine) and **diphenhydramine** (Benadryl) have been proven to counteract motion sickness and are approved by the Food and Drug Administration for use by children older than 2. The catch is that they take 30 minutes to an hour to kick in, and they can leave you feeling drowsy or light-headed. Newer, nonsedating OTC antihistamines such as **loratadine** (Claritin) and **cetirizine** (Zyrtec p) might relieve allergy symptoms but don't appear to quell a queasy stomach.

If all else fails, try:

PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

Promethazine (Phenergan) is another antihistamine effective at relieving nausea, but it might make you sleepy. Another choice is prescription-strength **meclizine** (Antivert), although it, too, may cause drowsiness. A **scopolamine patch** (Transderm-Scop) is also very effective, but side effects including blurred vision and severe drowsiness make it a treatment of last resort. Some patients also report a rebound effect, including nausea, dizziness, and headaches when they remove the patch.

How NOT to toss your cookies!

- **Eat stomach-soothing foods.** Have a light meal about 3 hours before setting out. Avoid dairy products and foods that are high in protein or sodium. A light breakfast of an orange, for example, may stay down better than bacon and eggs. If motion sickness strikes, munch on crackers and take small sips of a carbonated drink or fruit juice. Chew on ginger candies or pop a ginger supplement. Chamomile and peppermint are also used to quell stomach upset.
- **Get the best seat.** Pick the spot least affected by motion—up front in a car, over a wing on a plane, or midship on a boat deck.
- **Avoid nausea triggers.** These include alcohol, cigarette smoke, and pungent odors. The power of suggestion is strong, so if possible, stay far away from other sick passengers.
- **Focus your mind.** If you can, lean into your headrest to minimize movement and focus on the horizon or a distant object. Don't read or watch movies. If you're queasy, close your eyes and recline until the feeling passes.
- **Get some air.** Crack a window, turn on a vent, or step out on a ship's deck to get some soothing fresh air.

HOW TO HANDLE CARSICK KIDS

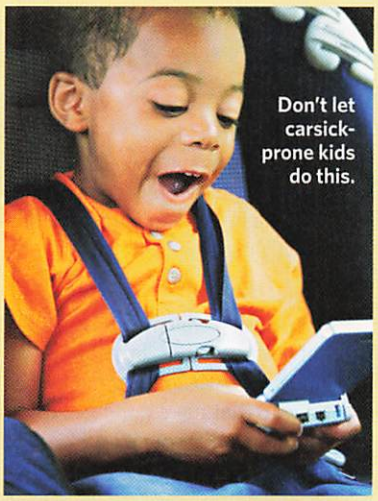
If your child is not a "great little traveler," don't worry. Many kids outgrow motion sickness by adolescence. In the meantime, try these steps to help minimize your travel troubles.

DON'T let carsickness-prone kids read, color, play handheld games, or watch videos. Have them listen to music or audiobooks and play games such as I Spy that involve looking out the window.

DO plan frequent stops for fresh air. Wear the kids out at a park or fast-food play area. Sleeping children don't get carsick.

DO be prepared with a waterproof bag and a cleanup kit. Include a change of clothes, paper towels, an enzyme-based pet-spot remover (good for cleaning and deodorizing after human accidents too), and a towel to cover the cleaned seat.

DON'T give susceptible kids an untried OTC antihistamine. Try a test dose at home. These drugs make most people drowsy, but some kids have the opposite reaction. And you don't want to be stuck in a moving vehicle with a hyper child.


Don't let carsick-prone kids do this.

CHILD: WORKBOOKSTOCK/JUPITERIMAGES

A leg up

Tired of shaving but want nice smooth legs? Get epilating, girl!

If keeping your stubble under control during pool season is making you cranky, toss those razors and try an epilator. These clever little gadgets remove hair below the skin surface, leaving it so smooth you won't believe anything ever grew there. Epilators use high-speed grabbers to pull hair up and out. Our testers tried five brands; the three below were our favorites and all of them claim to give you silky skin not just on legs but also under arms and around bikini lines. At first, all those warp-speed yanks might feel like a zillion pinpricks—epilating has about the same pain level as waxing—but over time, hair comes back a little lighter and less painful to zap. And the smooth results can last three weeks or longer, so you'll be able to spend more time at the pool and less time hunched over in the bathroom. Also see the electric shavers at right. They're made for guys—but they're nice to have around to borrow for quickie shaves.

TRY THIS!
When epilating, use one hand to pull skin taut while you de-fuzz with the other. Then rub away the pinpricks.

CAUTION RAZOR BUMPS AHEAD!

Here's how to stop them:

IF YOU USE A BLADE RAZOR

- Get a fresh blade.
- Soften the hair by taking a shower or bath before shaving.
- Shave in the direction of the hair growth, not against it.

IF YOU EPILATE

- Keep skin well moisturized between sessions, but not during.
- Gently exfoliate from time to time so that hairs don't get trapped under your skin.

lights the way

Braun Silk-epil Xelle 5270
Price $75
Why we like it It's got a headlight to illuminate hairs so you won't miss them, and you can use it overseas without a converter. Testers loved it.
Bummer It has no battery, so you need an outlet to use it.
Where to get it Drugstores, online

battery-operated

Emjoi OptiMax AP-98R
Price $80

Epilady Legend EP-810-33
Price $60

Why we like them These two plug in or run on batteries, so you can use them anywhere. But if you want to plug in overseas, you'll need a voltage converter.
Where to get them Drugstores, online

WOMAN: CORBIS PHOTOGRAPHY/VEER

Men's shavers we love

Blades generally cut closest, but many guys find electrics a lot more convenient. And they're good for those last-minute armpit touchups (we won't tell!). So if you're shopping for a shaver for your guy, you might want to consider one of our Smart Picks at right. We had 16 male staffers try 14 electric shavers. (These gizmos fall into two camps, foil and rotary, but they work basically the same way: Hair pokes through a mesh or slotted circular cover so blades can slice it without nicking the skin.) Once a week, sensory experts felt our testers' faces an hour after shaving to check smoothness. Our Smart Picks all got high marks in the cheek-touch test. They all work with and without their cords, and they can be quick-charged in about 5 minutes for an emergency shave.

Braun 360 Complete 8985
Price $170
Why we like it This one recharges in an hour, works overseas without a voltage converter, and is self-cleaning.
Bummer You can't rinse it; you must replace its cleaning cartridge after about 30 uses for $5.
Where to get it Drugstores, online

Philips Norelco Speed XL 8160XLCC
Price $130
Why we like it You can use its cleaning unit or rinse it with water. It also works overseas without a voltage converter.
Bummer If you use the cleaning unit, you must refill it after about 15 uses at about $6 a pop.
Where to get it Drugstores, online

Remington MicroScreen 500 MS2-390
Price $60
Why we like it The price is right and it worked as well as more expensive models. Also, this model recharges in just one hour. (Others can take more than 7 hours to recharge.)
Bummer It has no cleaning unit.
Where to get it Drugstores, online

Should you go electric?

ELECTRIC SHAVER PROS

- There's less chance of nicks.
- No soap and water are needed, a real plus if you're on the road or aren't near a bathroom.

ELECTRIC SHAVER CONS

- Good old razor blades generally give you a cleaner shave than electric shavers.
- You have to replace the heads every six months to two years, and after a few years, when the battery stops holding a charge, you have to buy new batteries from the maker or simply replace the whole thing.

TIP It might take time to get used to a new epilator or electric shaver, so be sure to buy one with at least a 30-day, money-back guarantee.

SUMMER SKIN SAVERS

Your skin can take a beating in summer from all that sun, chlorinated pool water, and the showers you take to stay cool, says Jessica J. Krant, M.D., a Scarsdale, N.Y., dermatologist and assistant professor of dermatology at SUNY Downstate. Shaving and epilating can also disrupt the skin's natural moisture barrier, leading to dryness and irritation. So what should you do? Here's what the doctor recommends:

First, try to stay out of the sun as much as possible and use a daily sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher; shift to 45 or higher for direct sun exposure. Choose a sunscreen with maximum protection against both UVA and UVB rays. Two top-rated sunscreens from our latest test are Neutrogena Ultra-Sheer Dry-Touch SPF 45 and No-Ad SunBlock Lotion Maxiumum SPF 45. Reapply sunscreen every two hours and after swimming or sweating a lot, or after you've toweled off.

At night, use a mild moisturizer packed with ceramides and lipids. Ask your doctor about Cerave and Lipikar. And don't blame saltwater for itchy skin. It can actually be helpful for some skin problems.

Consumer Reports ShopSmart
Gas Ranges - Gas ov
Hotpoint RG 72 $550
GE JGBP69V 69 $850
Thermador I 69 $4100
GE Profile J 68 $1600
MayTag MGI 68 $1150
Whirlpool GI 68 $1000
Whirlpool SF 68 $600
Jenn-Air JGI 68 $1500

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food

what's inside

66 Wine deals
Our expert wine testers tried nearly two dozen pinot grigios, which are great for summer seafood menus. One of their two top picks is a mere $8.

68 Vegging out
You don't have to be a vegetarian to love veggie burgers. See which patties our tasters flipped for and how they stack up against beef and turkey burgers.

70 Diet-friendly fast food
We scoured the menus of your favorite fast-food joints to come up with 32 diet-friendly treats. Plus sneaky high-cal extras to steer clear of.

WENDELL WEBBER; PROP STYLIST: JEFFSTYLES.COM

Crisp summer whites

Refreshing pinot grigio is perfect for warm-weather menus

21 TESTED

8 SMART PICKS

Italy put pinot grigio on the map, but some of the best bottles that our expert wine testers quaffed come from right here in the U.S., including the top-rated Clos du Bois. Our other top pick, the Yellow Tail Pinot Grigio, comes from Australia (it also happens to be one of the cheapest bottles we tested at just $8).

The Clos du Bois and the Yellow Tail got high marks for their mix of tropical fruit, citrus, and (no kidding) Juicy Fruit gum flavors, which are some of the key characteristics of the pinot grigio grape. These wines also have a refreshing acidity.

Though slightly less intense than our two top picks, the six wines at right are also very good. Most have citrus and tropical fruit aromas, plus hints of apple, pear, and even honey, punctuated by a crisp acidity.

Pinot grigio may have one of two basic personalities or a mix of both. Those made in the so-called Old World style are very crisp and have less fruit flavor. Some critics say they can taste like "lemon water" or "wine's equivalent of light beer." New World versions, which are often referred to as pinot gris, are made in places like Washington, Oregon, California, and Australia and tend to have more intense fruit flavors. They're also generally fuller-bodied and almost never bitter. Most of our Smart Picks are a mix of the two styles.

Try these with pinot grigio

Any of our Smart Picks will complement fresh fruit and a variety of seafood dishes. All go particularly well with fish and deep-fried calamari. The Yellow Tail is an especially nice match for spicy Thai or Chinese food, which also goes well with the San Angelo and Willamette Valley wines. Seafood chowder, seafood with cream sauce, and seafood pasta alfredo are other creamy dishes that are a good match for a nice pinot grigio.

THAI FOOD: ANN STRATTON/FOODPIX/JUPITERIMAGES

the best bottles

Clos du Bois 2007
California, $14

Yellow Tail 2007
Australia, $8

also worth trying

San Angelo 2006
Italy, $18

Robert Mondavi Private Selection 2006
California, $11

Montevina 2006
California, $10

Willamette Valley Vineyards Pinot Gris 2006
Oregon, $15

King Estate Signature Collection Pinot Gris 2006
Oregon, $16

Talus Collection 2006
California, $8

PINOT WHAT?

Pinot grigio is what Italians call it; the French version is pinot gris. Grauer burgunder and ruländer are the names used in Germany. To make things even more confusing, there are many other types of pinot, including pinot noir and pinot blanc. In all, there are at least 100 names for pinot, although most are synonyms, according to the Oxford Companion to Wine. So why are they called pinot? The word "pinot" probably refers to the pinecone shape of the grape cluster. The two main types you'll find here in the U.S. are pinot noir and pinot gris or grigio. The dark pinot noir (French for black) grapes make red wine and the lighter pinot grigio (Italian for gray) grapes make white wine.

TIPS FROM OUR TEST KITCHEN

Having a picnic? Read this first! Warm weather means a higher risk of foodborne illness. Our test-kitchen experts Maxine Siegel, Linda Greene, and Ellen Klosz (from left) tell you how to pack that basket.

Pack it right. A full cooler will keep its cold temperature longer than one that's partially filled. Wrap raw meat, fish, and poultry to prevent juices from contaminating other foods. And don't let coolers cook in the sun.

Prep it right. If you marinate meat, fish, or poultry before grilling, never reuse the marinade unless it's been boiled to destroy any bacteria. (And keep marinating food in the cooler until you're ready to grill.) Cook meats completely at the picnic site, not partially beforehand. And don't use the same platter before and after you grill. Bacteria from raw food could contaminate cooked food.

Cook it right. Keep hot foods hot (over 140° F) and cold foods cold (below 40° F). Use a meat thermometer when you grill to keep track of the temperature. Color is not an indication of doneness.

Serve it right. Don't let food sit out for more than 2 hours (1 hour if the temperature is above 90° F). If food stays out longer, toss it. The acidity in some foods like mayonnaise and salad dressings may have a slight preservative effect, but don't take a chance.

Vegging out

You'll flip for these no-meat burgers—yes, even you beef lovers

When you think about firing up the grill for a family summer barbecue, hamburgers are probably the first thing that come to mind. But all that fat! And calories! What about turkey burgers? Sorry, they're still not exactly low-calorie or low-fat. (See the chart below.) But veggie burgers taste like sawdust, right?

Not anymore. If you haven't tried one in a while (or ever), now's the time to experiment. Based on our recent taste tastes, it looks as if food manufacturers have been tinkering with flavors and textures. So yes, you might actually think they're delicious, even if you're not a vegetarian. The veggie burgers in the grocery store come in two main styles. Some mimic a meat-based burger and are usually soy-based. Some are made of mashed vegetables, wheat, rice, and other grains, and they don't taste anything like a beef burger. There are also a couple of very good-tasting patties that are kind of a combination of the two styles.

Although their nutritional profiles varied, most of the veggie burgers shown here have no more than 120 calories, are low in fat, and contain a good amount of fiber. Just one warning: Most are loaded with sodium. Here are the nutritional breakdowns and detailed descriptions of the veggie burgers our taste testers tried, in order of their tastiness within each group. Now go fire up that grill! (See our great grill picks on page 28.)

HOW THE BURGERS STACK UP

Here's how the nutritional stats of the veggie burgers we tested compare with beef and turkey burgers, based on a patty that's about 2.5 ounces when cooked.

	Calories	Fat (g)	Saturated fat (g)	Protein (g)	Dietary fiber (g)	Sodium (mg)
VEGGIE BURGER	70-140	0.5-6	0-1	5-16	2-5	250-500
BEEF 95% lean	118	4	2	19	0	50
TURKEY	170	9	2	20	0	80
BEEF 80% lean	177	11	4	17	0	60

Sources: Veggie burgers info from labels; beef and turkey burgers info from USDA database

combo of meatlike and vegetable/grain burgers

MorningStar Farms Garden Veggie Patties
Price per burger $1.07
Calories 110
Fat 3.5 grams
Protein 10 grams
Fiber 3 grams
Sodium 350 milligrams
Tasters' notes This is the patty our testers judged the best-tasting of all. A thin, crispy, moist burger, it contains colorful bits of vegetables, including mushrooms, onions, and water chestnuts.

Amy's All American Veggie Burger The Classic
Price per burger $1.12
Calories 120
Fat 3 grams
Protein 10 grams
Fiber 3 grams
Sodium 390 milligrams
Tasters' notes This is a spicy, slightly sweet, and flavorful patty. The strong flavors were nicely balanced when tasters tried it on a bun with ketchup or mustard.

meatlike veggie burgers

most MEAT-LIKE!

Boca All American Flame Grilled Meatless Burgers
Price per burger 96 cents
Calories 90
Fat 3 grams
Protein 14 grams
Fiber 3 grams
Sodium 280 milligrams
Tasters' notes You might think it's a real hamburger after it's dressed up with condiments on a bun.

Veggie Patch Garlic Portabella Burgers
Price per burger $1.00
Calories 120
Fat 6 grams
Protein 11 grams
Fiber 4 grams
Sodium 320 milligrams
Tasters' notes This is moist with slight mushroom and smoky flavors. It's also a bit rubbery.

MorningStar Farms Grillers Original
Price per burger $1.08
Calories 130
Fat 6 grams
Protein 15 grams
Fiber 2 grams
Sodium 260 milligrams
Tasters' notes Thin and crispy, this patty has more of a fat flavor than most of the other burgers.

fewest CALORIES!

Boca Original Vegan Meatless Burgers
Price per burger 94 cents
Calories 70
Fat 0.5 grams
Protein 13 grams
Fiber 4 grams
Sodium 280 milligrams
Tasters' notes This one is moist with a smoky taste and would be good for grilling.

vegetable/grain burgers

Dr. Praeger's Sensible Foods California Veggie Burgers
Price per burger $1.08
Calories 110
Fat 4.5 grams
Protein 5 grams
Fiber 4 grams
Sodium 250 milligrams
Tasters' notes Soft, with a crispy outside and bursting with tasty frozen-style veggies, this one would be best without a bun.

Gardenburger Portabella Veggie Burgers
Price per burger 98 cents
Calories 90
Fat 2.5 grams
Protein 5 grams
Fiber 5 grams
Sodium 360 milligrams
Tasters' notes It has nice chewy grains, and it's moist and flavorful, with mushroom, onion, and garlic flavors.

Gardenburger The Original Veggie Burgers
Price per burger 97 cents
Calories 100
Fat 3.5 grams
Protein 5 grams
Fiber 5 grams
Sodium 420 milligrams
Tasters' notes This one's also flavorful, with hints of garlic, mushroom, onion, and cheese, and chewy grains.

Amy's California Veggie Burger Garden Vegetables
Price per burger $1.14
Calories 140
Fat 5 grams
Protein 6 grams
Fiber 4 grams
Sodium 430 milligrams
Tasters' notes This crispy nut and mushroom patty has a big flavor and chewy grains, and a slight bouillon taste.

Not as good

These two meatlike veggie burgers weren't quite as tasty as the others we tested

Franklin Farms Portabella Fresh Veggiburger
Tasters' notes Although this patty has a slightly smoky flavor and visible pieces of vegetables, it is also slightly soft, a bit spongy, and crumbly.

Lightlife Meatless Light Burgers
Tasters' notes This patty has 16 grams of protein, more than any other brand, but it is also dry, dense, and slightly rubbery. At $1.48 per burger, it is also by far the most expensive.

Guilt-free fast food

Yes, you can eat burgers and pizza—without gaining weight

Fast food is tasty, it fills you up, and the price is certainly right. But it's loaded with calories. Even some healthy-looking menu items like salads can weigh in at over 800 calories. So is there anything you can order without packing on the pounds? We pored over the calorie counts of dozens of items at top fast-food restaurants to find out. The bottom line: No fast food is perfect (even lower-calorie options may be loaded with sodium; some have more than a third of the recommended daily amount) so you shouldn't eat it every day. But it turns out that wherever you eat, you can make good lower-calorie and lower-fat selections. And don't think that some fast-food restaurants are better for your waistline than others. A recent study found that at Subway—famous for its ads featuring Jared "The Subway Guy," who lost more than 200 pounds eating at the chain restaurant—people ended up eating about 350 more calories than they did at McDonald's. Our picks can help you make better choices. Also, see page 74 for calorie counts of add-ons like cheese, sauces, and condiments. People who plan to eat right may end up blowing it by adding high-calorie extras to lower-calorie menu choices. But that doesn't mean you have to skip dessert. See page 73 for sweets that won't kill your diet.

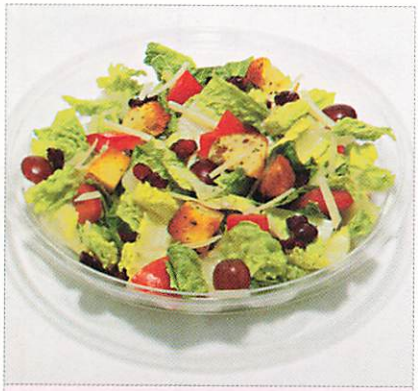
The 12 rules of fast-food ordering

1. Look up nutritional stats at a fast-food chain's Web site before you go there so you can plan your meal.
2. Ask if you can order that burger, chicken sandwich, or other item without the cheese and sauce. Or ask if you can get the sauce on the side, or order a half-portion.
3. Pass up combination meals. They're designed to be filling. (Read: larger with more calories.)
4. Choose grilled or roasted meats over fried ones.
5. Split appetizers or turn a side into a main course.
6. Skip the fries. Instead, get a baked potato or some veggies on the side. A large order of fries can set you back as many as 600 calories. If you can't live without them, split a large serving or order a small one and save 300 calories.
7. Stick with "original" or "traditional" burgers and sandwiches, which tend to be smaller than newer menu items. And stay away from anything crispy, like Burger King's Tendercrisp Chicken Sandwich (790 calories).
8. Don't eat the top bun or bread slice.
9. Steer clear of regular mayo and cream dressings. Instead, ask for mustard, salsa, and low-fat mayo.
10. Order a salad but not one that comes in a calorie-dense deep-fried shell or is covered with cheese, croutons, or deep-fried or breaded meats.
11. Have a glass of water or a sugar-free drink. Regular sodas can have up to 400 calories a pop.
12. For dessert, stick with frozen yogurt or light ice cream—the child's cup or cone size.

LAURA JOHANSEN; FOOD STYLIST: LISA HOMA

Smart Picks

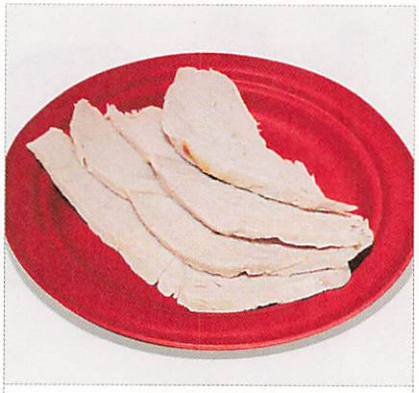
No need to bypass your favorite fast-food joints when you're on the go and need to refuel. Just order one of these lower-calorie options.



Au Bon Pain

RIVIERA SALAD, no dressing *(shown)*
Calories **260**
Saturated fat **3 grams**
Sodium **250 milligrams**

SPICY TUNA SANDWICH
Calories **490**
Saturated fat **3 grams**
Sodium **1,110 milligrams**



Boston Market

ROASTED TURKEY *(shown)*
Calories **180**
Saturated fat **1 gram**
Sodium **635 milligrams**

ROASTED SIRLOIN
Calories **290**
Saturated fat **6 grams**
Sodium **440 milligrams**

Burger King

WHOPPER JR., no mayo *(shown)*
Calories **290**
Saturated fat **4.5 grams**
Sodium **490 milligrams**

TENDERGRILL CHICKEN GARDEN SALAD, light Italian dressing
Calories **360**
Saturated fat **5 grams**
Sodium **1,160 milligrams**

Domino's Pizza

CRUNCHY THIN-CRUST PIZZA 2 slices from a 12-inch pie, 2 or 3 veggie toppings *(shown)*
Calories **290**; Saturated fat **5 grams**
Sodium **570 milligrams**

GRILLED CHICKEN CAESAR, light Italian dressing
Calories **120**; Saturated fat **2 grams**
Sodium **1,090 milligrams**

KFC

OVEN-ROASTED TWISTER SANDWICH, no sauce *(shown)*
Calories **330**; Saturated fat **2.5 grams**
Sodium **1,120 milligrams**

ORIGINAL RECIPE CHICKEN BREAST, no breading
Calories **140**; Saturated fat **0 grams**
Sodium **520 milligrams**

McDonald's

FILET-O-FISH *(shown)*
Calories **380**; Saturated fat **4 grams**
Sodium **660 milligrams**

ASIAN SALAD, grilled chicken, low-fat balsamic vinaigrette
Calories **340**; Saturated fat **1 gram**
Sodium **1,620 milligrams**

Source: Nutritional information from restaurant Web sites.

Pizza Hut

FIT N' DELICIOUS PIZZA,
2 slices from a 12-inch pie, green pepper, red onion, diced tomato topping *(shown)*
Calories **300**
Saturated fat **3 grams**
Sodium **840 milligrams**

SPAGHETTI with marinara sauce
Calories **490**; Saturated fat **1.5 grams**
Sodium **1,050 milligrams**

Ranch *1

CHICKEN TENDERS,
all white meat *(shown)*
Calories **370**
Saturated fat **3 grams**
Sodium **620 milligrams**

RANCH CLASSIC
Calories **370**
Saturated fat **1 gram**
Sodium **550 milligrams**

Subway

SWEET ONION CHICKEN TERIYAKI
6-inch *(shown)*
Calories **370**
Saturated fat **1.5 grams**
Sodium **1,200 milligrams**

VEGGIE DELIGHT, 6-inch
Calories **230**
Saturated fat **1 gram**
Sodium **500 milligrams**

Taco Bell

FRESCO STEAK
BURRITO SUPREME *(shown)*
Calories **330**
Saturated fat **3 grams**
Sodium **1,250 milligrams**

FRESCO BEAN BURRITO
Calories **330**
Saturated fat **2.5 grams**
Sodium **8**

Uno Chicago Grill

HOUSE SALAD with grilled chicken and dressing *(shown)*
Calories **260**
Saturated fat **0 grams**
Sodium **760 milligrams**

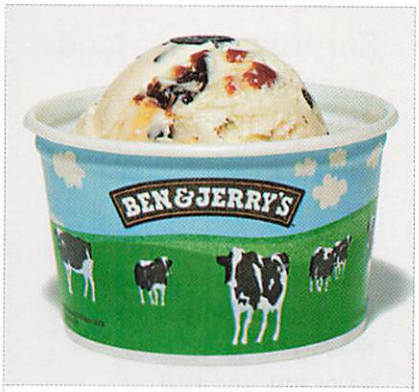
GRILLED CHICKEN
with mango salsa
Calories **220**; Saturated fat **0 grams**
Sodium **1,040 milligrams**

Wendy's

SMALL CHILI *(shown)*
Calories **220**
Saturated fat **2.5 grams**
Sodium **780 milligrams**

JR. HAMBURGER
Calories **230**
Saturated fat **3 grams**
Sodium **500 milligrams**

And now for dessert ...



Ben & Jerry's

CHERRY GARCIA LOW-FAT FROZEN YOGURT, half cup *(shown)*
Calories **170**
Saturated fat **2 grams**
Sodium **22 milligrams**

BERRIED TREASURE SORBET, half cup
Calories **110**
Saturated fat **0 grams**
Sodium **24 milligrams**

Dunkin' Donuts

FRENCH CRULLER *(shown)*
Calories **150**
Saturated fat **5 grams**
Sodium **8 milligrams**

GLAZED DONUT
Calories **230**
Saturated fat **4.5 grams**
Sodium **12 milligrams**

Häagen-Dazs

CHOCOLATE LOW-FAT SORBET, half cup *(shown)*
Calories **130**
Saturated fat **0 grams**
Sodium **20 milligrams**

WILDBERRY FROZEN YOGURT, half cup
Calories **180**; Saturated fat **1 gram**
Sodium **27 milligrams**

Krispy Kreme

SUGAR DOUGHNUT *(shown)*
Calories **200**
Saturated fat **6 grams**
Sodium **10 milligrams**

GLAZED CINNAMON DOUGHNUT
Calories **210**
Saturated fat **6 grams**
Sodium **12 milligrams**

Stand back!

Just for fun, here are some shocking fast-food calorie counts we came across. Add fries or a nondiet drink and you're up to more than 1,000 calories.

Pizza Hut
2 slices from a 14-inch pepperoni pan pizza — **800**

Taco Bell
Fiesta Taco Salad (shown) — **840**

Wendy's
Baconator — **840**

Subway
6-inch Double Meat Meatball Marinara Sub — **860**

KFC
Chicken and Biscuit Bowl — **870**

Au Bon Pain
Turkey Melt — **890**

Burger King Double Whopper with Cheese — **990**

TIP Order kids' meals to cut down on calories.

THE EXTRAS

The stuff you plop on top or dip into can really add up—if you make the wrong choices. Here's a sampling of toppings listed from the fewest calories to the most.

Extra	Calories
MUSTARD (½ teaspoon, Wendy's)	5
KETCHUP (1 packet, McDonald's)	15
BACON (1 strip, Wendy's)	15
SALSA (side, Taco Bell)	15
MAYONNAISE (1 teaspoon, Wendy's)	40
OLIVE OIL (1 teaspoon, Subway)	45
BARBECUE SAUCE (1 package, McDonald's)	50
CHEDDAR CHEESE (portion on a 6-inch Subway sandwich)	60
SOUR CREAM (side, Taco Bell)	80
RANCH DIPPING SAUCE (1 ounce, Burger King)	140
ONION RING DIPPING SAUCE (1 ounce, Burger King)	150
CAESAR DRESSING (2 ounces, Au Bon Pain)	280

Chew on these!

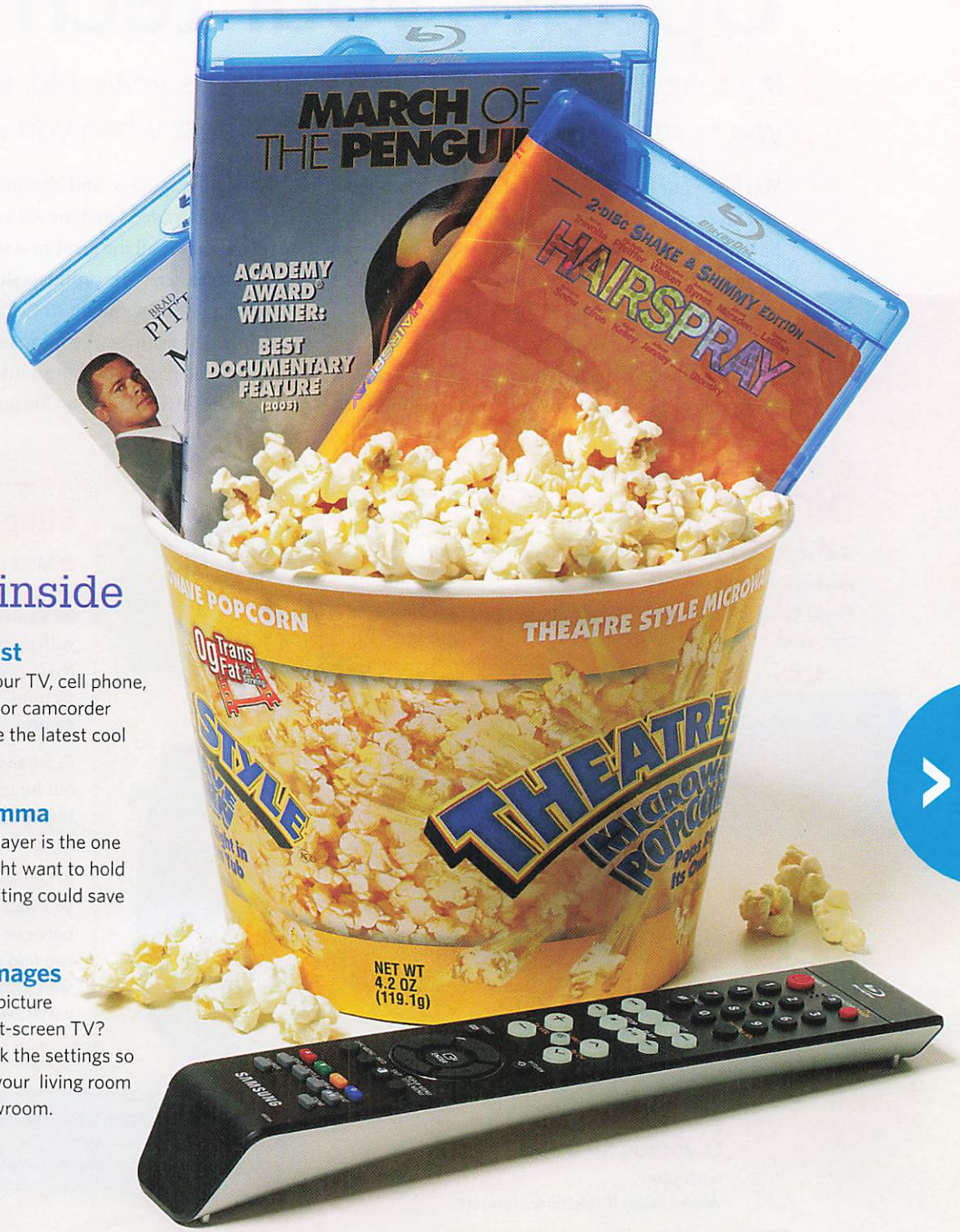
Surprising fast-food facts based on recent studies

- People who ate fast food more than twice a week gained on average about 10 more pounds than those who ate it less than once a week, according to a 15-year study.
- One fast-food meal can easily hide more than 2,300 milligrams of sodium, a full day's worth of what's recommended for adults.
- Large portions can throw off your sense of how much you're eating, according to another report. Study subjects found that their ability to estimate how many calories were in their fast-food meals declined as the size of the meals got bigger. So supersizing it might end up doing more damage than you think. The lesson: Be careful about giant portions—yes, even if you're not planning to eat the whole thing.

THE BOTTOM LINE Keep fast food as an occasional treat, not part of your regular diet.

TIP Ordering Chinese? Go for garlic or black-bean sauce and avoid sweet-and-sour dishes.

electronics



what's inside

76 Gadget lust
Haven't updated your TV, cell phone, camera, computer, or camcorder in a while? Here are the latest cool features you'll love.

82 DVD dilemma
Why a new DVD player is the one gizmo that you might want to hold off on, and why waiting could save you a bundle.

84 Sharper images
Want to make that picture pop on your new flat-screen TV? Here's how to tweak the settings so it looks as good in your living room as it did in the showroom.

WENDELL WEBBER; PROP STYLIST: JEFFSTYLES.COM

Update your tech life

If you're still carrying around gear that's years old, here's what you're missing—and how to get the most when you upgrade

You love your cell phone and your digital camera and all your other electronic gadgets, but if you haven't bought new ones in the past few years, you might be surprised at what's out there. Cameras now zoom so close they can capture a butterfly wing, flat-screen TVs are so sharp you'll feel like George Clooney's actually in the room, and many cell phones now handle e-mail. A lot of electronics are also lighter, quicker, and cheaper than ever. So if you haven't upgraded lately, now's a good time to do it.

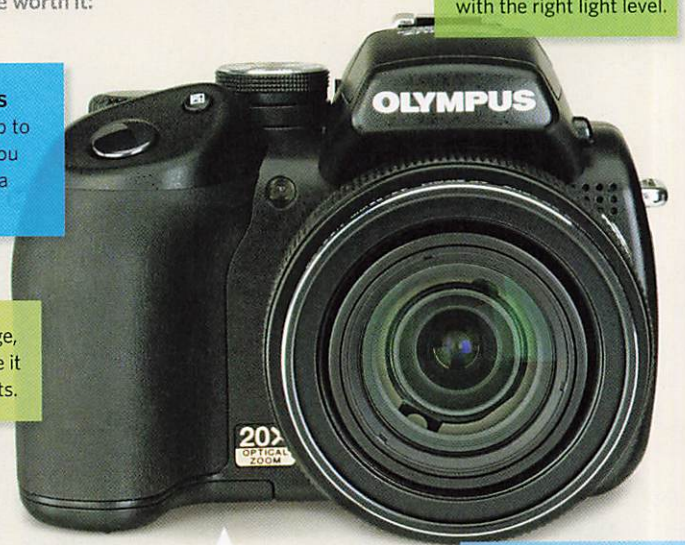
Read on for all the great new stuff that will make your life easier. (The products shown below and on the next few pages might not include all the highlighted features. For more top product picks, go to *www.ShopSmartmag.org*, and click on the 30-day free trial subscription to ConsumerReports.org.)

DIGITAL CAMERAS

The latest point-and-shoot models offer higher resolutions so you have more flexibility to crop pictures and make large prints. They're also just plain easier to use. Here are other features that make an upgrade worth it:

Face detection Camera settings adjust automatically, so faces are always in focus, with the right light level.

More powerful zooms The latest lenses zoom up to 18x optical or higher so you can shoot closeups from a greater distance.



Better previews Large, clear LCD screens make it easier to view your shots.

Fewer shaky images Image stabilizers help you avoid blurry shots taken by shaky hands, which is especially helpful when you're zooming in to the max.

Olympus SP 570UZ

Price $499
Where to get it Electronics retailers

Shopping tips

- More pixels mean better resolution, but don't let a salesperson snow you with numbers. If you don't blow up or crop lots of pictures, a 7-megapixel camera should be fine.
- Small is nice, but watch out for controls that are so tiny that they're difficult to operate.
- Some models make you wait several seconds between shots. You can find out about shutter delays at *www.ConsumerReports.org*.

>> COMING NEXT Future cameras will offer high-speed photography so you can take shots of a golf swing in slow motion.

CELL PHONES

If you're impressed because your cell phone can store dozens of numbers and snap pictures, check this out: The latest models can also create and edit documents, handle e-mail, and play music and record video. Even better, they're shrinking in size and price. Here are some other cool features:

Bluetooth You'll have blissfully wireless hands-free conversation.

***Touch screens** You can switch tasks with ease.

Web access With wireless connections, you send and receive e-mail or surf the Web on the go.

Larger displays You won't have to squint.

Better cameras Count on 1 or 2 megapixels, at least.

Keyboards You won't have to hunt and peck when you text-message your kids who no longer take calls.

GPS navigation You'll never get lost again. (You may have to subscribe to get GPS navigation service.)

Music and video players Keep yourself entertained while you're multitasking.

Pantech Duo

(*This model does not have a touch screen.)

Price $99 with a two-year contract, with rebate

Where to get it AT&T

Shopping tips

- Before you replace your cell phone, decide whether to stick with the same service or switch. In our surveys, Verizon and Alltel were two of the best carriers. But also ask local friends how they'd rate their coverage.
- Find out about rebates and special offers at the carrier's Web site and in its stores. Then compare what's there with what independent dealers offer at their sites and outlets.
- If you're a new customer or about to re-up, haggle with the carrier to see if you can get an even better deal.
- Skip insurance. Our experts say it usually doesn't pay.

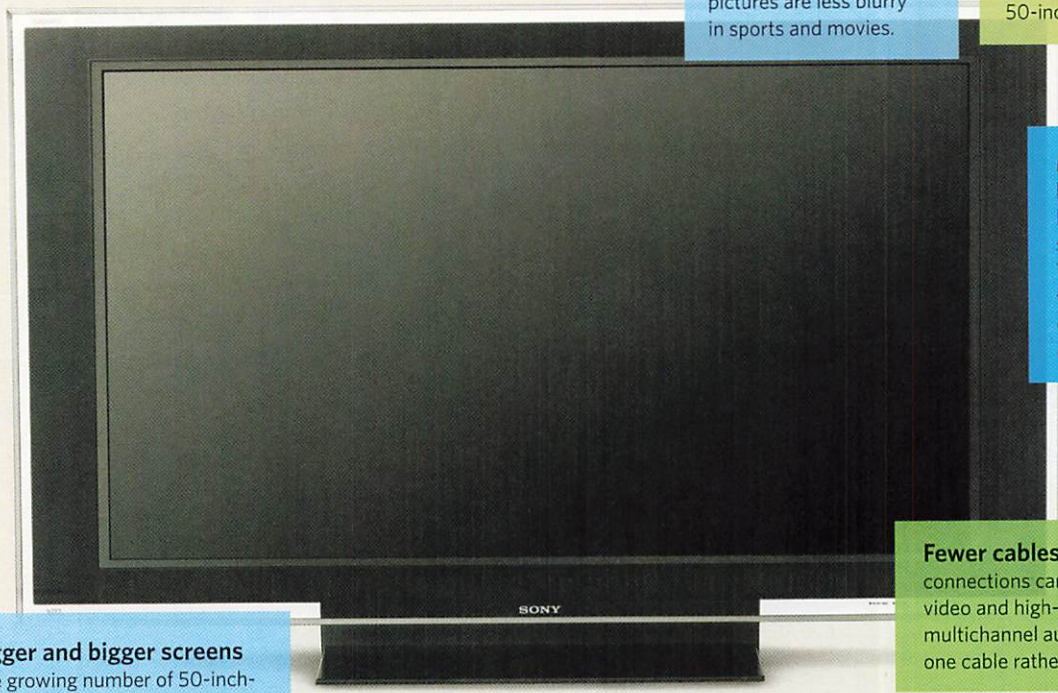
>> **COMING NEXT** Phones that you can wave in front of a scanner to pay for purchases will let you leave your purse at home.

FLAT SCREENS

These TVs are getting even slimmer and lighter, and picture quality is getting sharper. Yet prices keep tumbling. A 40- or 42-inch LCD set, for example, could cost about 20 percent less this December than it did last year. Here are other features to watch for:

Smoother motion on some LCD TVs With faster refresh rates, pictures are less blurry in sports and movies.

More pixels Many new TVs have 1080-pixel resolution for finer details. It's most noticeable on 50-inch and larger sets.



More inputs You can hook up more devices—a DVR and surround-sound system, a DVD player, VCR, camcorder, and video- game player—and enjoy better picture quality.

Fewer cables HDMI connections carry high-def video and high-quality multichannel audio signals on one cable rather than several.

Bigger and bigger screens The growing number of 50-inch-plus sets means more choices for theater-like viewing.

Sony Bravia KDL 52XBR4 LCD
Price $3,500
Where to get it Major electronics retailers

Plasma or LCD?

PLASMA PLUSES Deep blacks and strong contrast create more natural-looking images, especially in dim light. And a wide viewing angle gives you a good view from anywhere in a room.

LCD PLUSES There are more screen sizes to choose from and more 1080p sets. LCDs are a bit brighter than plasmas and have less reflective screens for better viewing in a bright room.

Shopping tips

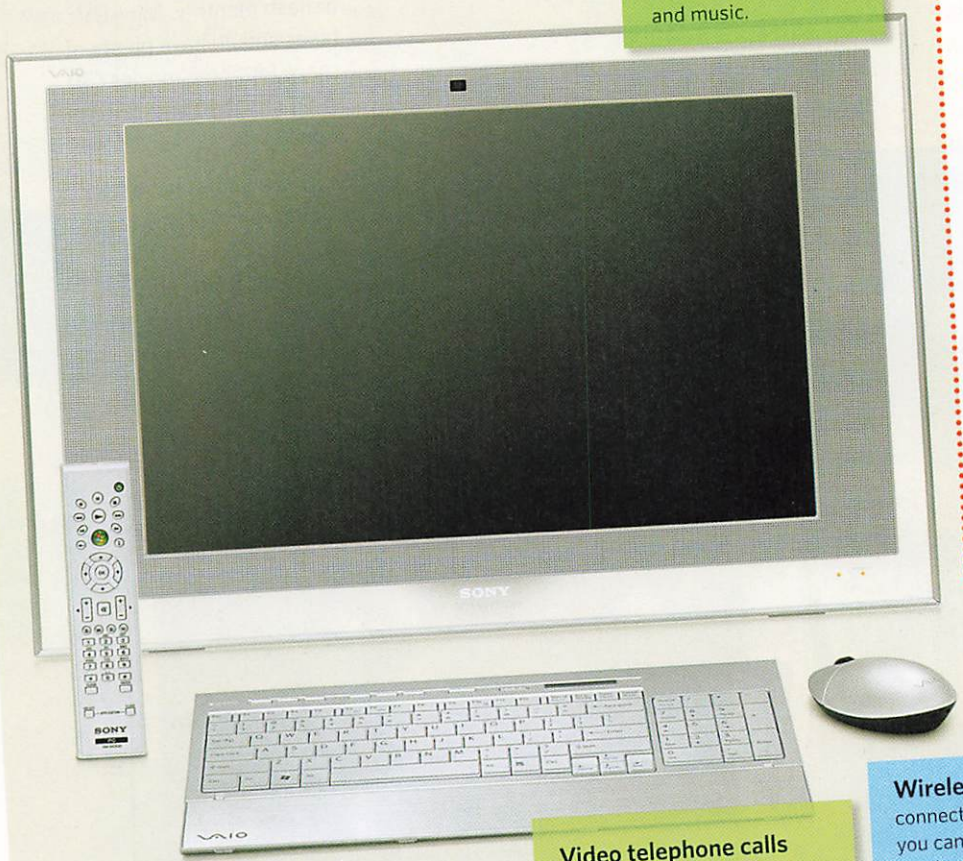
- Don't assume that LCD is a better choice than plasma. (See box at left.)
- If you're buying a set smaller than 50 inches, a resolution of 720p should be all you need.
- Don't buy an extended warranty. Flat screens have had a very low repair rate, so odds are you won't need it. And you can get longer coverage free from some retailers, such as Costco, and some credit-card companies.

>> **COMING NEXT** With wireless connections that eliminate all but the power cord, you can put your flat screen almost anywhere.

COMPUTERS

They run faster than ever, and their bigger brains can store all the things you need (like that huge music library). The extras are getting better all the time too. Here are a few of the cool things you'll get with a new machine:

Multi-multimedia More space on hard drives gives you more room for video and music.



Shopping tips

- New models land on the market several times a year. Look for deals on older models in early fall, after school has started, or right after the holidays.
- See if you can get the monitor thrown in free or at a reduced cost. Dell, for example, recently bundled a 20-inch monitor with a computer for a savings of $200.
- Stores sell well-priced systems. But if you want to customize, you can save money by configuring the system yourself at the Web site of the manufacturer.

Wirelessness With no cords to connect the keyboard and mouse, you can de-clutter your desk—well, maybe just a little.

Video telephone calls Microphones and webcams, coupled with free programs like Skype, let you talk face-to-face with far-flung loved ones for free. (See page 11 for more details.)

All-in-ones These machines combine the screen and the box in one unit, saving lots of space.

Extra USB ports for flash drives They make it easy to carry your photos and other files from one device to another.

Sony Vaio VGC-LT25

Price $1,900
Where to get it Major electronics retailers, SonyStyle.com

>> COMING NEXT Super-portable 7-inch and 9-inch laptops will be less than $500.

Movie moves

Should you buy a new DVD player for that flat-panel TV?

28 TESTED
2 SMART PICKS

Movie? Check. Popcorn? Check. DVD player? Check—or maybe not. If you've heard the news about Blu-ray high-definition DVDs, you might be wondering whether you should buy a new DVD player, especially if you have a nice new flat-screen TV. (Until recently, there were two incompatible high-definition formats—HD DVD and Blu-ray—and some movies were available only in one version or the other. Then Toshiba, the chief backer of HD DVD, called it quits on that format, making Blu-ray the only high-definition game in town.)

Our experts say you might not want to rush out and buy a Blu-ray player just yet. One reason is price. Right now, these players cost $400 or more, and if you wait six months, you're likely to get a better deal. Also, the technology is still evolving, so if you buy a Blu-ray player today, you could miss out on cool features that will be standard in future versions.

Earlier-model Blu-ray players, which are still available, don't have features such as "Bonus view," which lets you simultaneously watch a movie plus other material from the disc. Also, new players will connect to the Internet so you can see the latest movie trailers, get other online content such as director's or actor's commentaries, and play Web-based games.

So unless you just have to have the latest and greatest DVD player now, stick with a standard player. Here's the

TURN IT ON Even if you don't have a high-def DVD player, you may still be able to get comparable picture quality.

WHO-RAY?
Blu-ray picked up its name from the blue-violet laser that's used to read the densely packed data on a high-def video disc.

really good news: Most standard models are a steal right now—you can find good ones for less than $100. And on a decent-quality high-definition TV, even standard DVDs can look great. In addition, some players have the ability to "upconvert" standard DVDs, which can make the picture look better on some HDTVs. Another plus is that standard DVDs cost less than Blu-ray movies. Whichever way you decide to go, see our two Smart Picks at right.

bargain buy

If you're not ready to spring for a high-def player yet, here's a standard-def model that we like.

Panasonic DVD-S53*
Price $90
Why we like it It offers excellent picture quality with movie DVDs, and it's super easy to use.
Bummer Picture quality with DVDs recorded from video is not the best on this player, so it's not a great choice for TV shows and concerts on DVDs.
Where to get it Electronics retailers, online

*This model is being replaced by the DVD-S54.

smart splurge

If you must have a high-def player right now, try this Blu-ray model.

Samsung BD-P1400
Price $400
Why we like it It gives you terrific picture quality with both Blu-ray discs and standard DVDs.
Bummer In tests, this player didn't handle damaged Blu-ray discs very well.
Where to get it Electronics retailers, online

Oops! What if you switched to HD DVD?

Maybe you already bought an HD DVD player and are kicking yourself for not choosing Blu-ray. What should you do now? Of course, you can keep playing your existing library of HD DVD movies. And if you find some HD DVD flicks that you've been hankering to buy in the bargain bin, you may as well snap them up. You can also play new releases on standard-definition DVDs, though you won't get true high-def quality. At some point down the road, you may want to replace your HD DVD player with one that plays Blu-ray discs. But if you decide to stick with your HD DVD player at least for now, you don't have to stop building a DVD library—or turn your new player into a doorstop.

TIP When cleaning discs, wipe a soft, lint-free cloth from the center to the outer edge, as if you were slicing a pie.

Catch a game—and a movie

If you've got serious video-gamers in the family, you could go for a Sony PlayStation3. At $400, the PS3 isn't cheap, but it also plays Blu-ray discs, its picture quality is as good as what you'll find on dedicated Blu-ray players, and it connects to the Internet. But consider buying a separate remote control ($25) so you don't have to use the two-handed game controls to play movies.

TECH CHECK

with Donna Tapellini, our staff electronics guru

How to fine-tune your fancy new flat-screen TV

Your new HDTV set sure looked great in the showroom. When a waterfall flashed on the screen, you could see droplets in midair, and when that quarterback was sacked on the field, you could see the grass between his teeth. But now that you've brought your new set home, you're less than thrilled. According to our expert TV testers, a little tinkering can greatly improve the picture. Showrooms not only tune in programs that really make the image pop, but they also crank up the sharpness, color, and contrast. Their settings may not be the best for your living room, though, so here's how to perfect your HDTV in four easy steps.

■ **Get in the mode.** Find the onscreen menu for picture mode. Stay away from choices like Vivid or Dynamic, and choose Pro, Cinema, or Standard mode. These make the picture look more natural. To refine the settings even more, choose the Custom or User mode.

■ **Paint it black-and-white.** Start with the brightness setting. Your goal is to get the deepest blacks with the greatest detail in dark areas. Find a scene on a DVD with dark, barely visible details (like people in a shadow) or slide in a really dark movie like "Batman." Raise the brightness setting until details in the shadows are clear, then slowly take it back down until you get the black areas as dark as you can without losing the details. Now adjust the contrast. Look for a scene with gradients of white and near-white (icy or cloudy scenes work well). Raise the contrast all the way up and then take it back down again until you can see varying shades of white.

■ **Toss off the halos.** You may be inclined to set the sharpness as high as possible to get more detail, but doing so creates unnatural halo edges around objects. To get the optimal sharpness without going too far, pop in a DVD movie and pause on a detailed scene. Look for objects with distinct edges and increase the sharpness until you start to see a halo around the edges. Then lower the setting until the halo disappears but the details remain.

■ **Cue up the color.** To get a real-life picture, focus on faces. Adjust the color to get natural flesh tones. Adjust the tint so people don't look too red or green. Or find an image with gray in it, and adjust so it's neutral, not greenish or brownish. Once you've set color, brightness, sharpness, and contrast, you probably won't need to touch them again. But you may want to make changes depending on what you watch. Generally, a warmer color-temperature setting works best for movies. For some TV shows, you may prefer to tone it down.

TIP An easy way to fine-tune your TV settings is to buy a disc with test patterns and picture-tuning tips. Two to try are DVE HD Basics (Blu-ray), $30, (*www.videoessentials.com*) and Ovation Multimedia's Avia II for standard DVD, $50 (*www.ovationmultimedia.com*).

ILLUSTRATION: HARRY CAMPBELL

family

what's inside

86 Sanity savers
Yeah, we know, you're busy, juggling work, kids, and tons of other stuff. Check out these great tools for keeping track of it all.

88 Home, safe home
Many seemingly safe things around the house can pose serious dangers to your children. Here's what to watch out for.

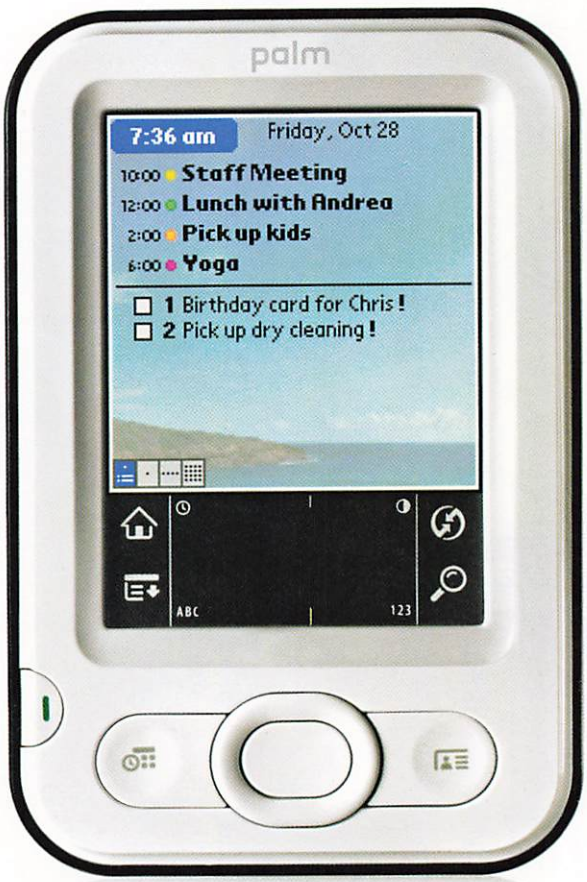
90 Savvy shopping
Some tips on buying furniture and other children's products that will be safe for your kids and also save you money.

WENDELL WEBBER; PROP STYLIST: JEFFSTYLES.COM

Family time

Great products to help get everyone organized and on schedule

When you have kids, multitasking rises to a new level—and so does keeping track of everyone and everything going on. Besides business trips, deadlines, doctors' appointments, holiday and vacation plans, errands and dinner parties, you have to manage the kids' agendas: play dates, tests and homework assignments, bake sales, school-photo day, pediatrician visits, field trips, sports practices and games, library books, DVD rentals, and don't forget the Brownies and Cub Scouts meetings. To keep on top of it all, forget the note-on-the-fridge approach. Here are high- and low-tech solutions to create a sanity-saving system so you'll never miss a birthday party or soccer game again. We didn't test these products in our labs (except the PDA), but our expert on babies, Sandra Gordon, tried them out on her family.



High-tech organizers

Palm Z22 (at left)

Price $100, *www.palm.com/us*

Why we like it If you're not wedded to a PDA yet and want to go paperless, the Palm Z22 is an inexpensive way to start. It has the tools for basic tasks, such as a calendar to keep track of appointments, expenses, and to-do lists. But you can't use it for e-mail.

Cozi.com

Price Free

Why we like it If you're a paper-calendar person, this is an easy electronic organizing system to try. The service lets you consolidate wall calendars, notes, and multiple schedules. It includes a shared calendar that's color-coded for each family member so you can track what everyone is doing and where he or she needs to be. It syncs with Outlook on your PDA or computer so you can coordinate between home and work calendars. It also includes a shopping list so you can keep track of items you need to buy.

You can send your grocery list from your computer to your mobile phone or call Cozi's toll-free number and have your lists and schedules read back to you while you're on the go. You can even send messages from Cozi to remind family members about important

dates, individually or all at once, via text messaging or e-mail.

Cell-phone alarm

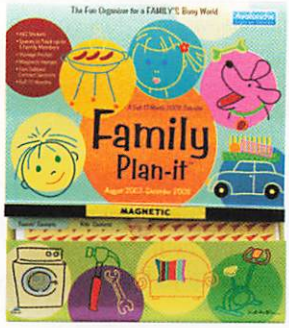
Price Nothing, if you already have a cell phone

Why we like it Many cell phones have an alarm feature that you can set to send you an alert—say, 30 minutes before you need to be somewhere. If you or your kids take medicine, you can program a different ring tone for each person to tell you it's time for a dose. So long, sticky notes!

No-tech organizers

Family Plan-It Pocket Wall Calendar

Price $13.99, *www.calendars.com*
Why we like it This one gets even smaller kids in on the action. The large calendar grid is color-coded so up to five family members can be visually cued to focus on the activities in their column. There are 442 stickers so even pre-writers can participate—hey, you're never too young to learn about scheduling! It has a storage pocket and a built-in magnetic hanger, so you can stick it on the fridge.



Whomi Agenda/ Clarity (at right)

Price $30, *www.whomi.com*
Why we like it The Whomi Agenda/Clarity does double duty. It's divided so you can record your personal and business appointments on the top page and use the color-coded spaces on the bottom for family members' schedules or other activities you track separately, like fitness classes, special projects, and volunteer work. Plus it's pretty and portable.

Day Runner Family Matters

Price Components range from $3 to $41, *www.dayrunner.com /familymatters*
Why we like it With this family-management system, nothing gets lost in the shuffle, and its sophisticated design will appeal to tweens and teens. The multiperson family calendar features color-coded columns so that up to five family members can list their own events and activities. And coordinating erasable door

reminders serve as a backup so that no one forgets library books, cell phones, or gym shoes again. Just hang them where the person will see

them—on a doorknob or cupboard knob. Heavy-duty, color-coordinated activity folders and storage cases help manage the flow of paperwork from your child's backpack so you can easily double-check the details of fund-raisers, holiday parties, and other family events.

Globe-Weis 13-Pocket File

Price $5, *www.staples.com*
Why we like it Big accordion files are generally paper traps. But a small version that you stow in your purse or the car can be an efficient on-the-go organizer. Label the tabs and use the file to stash coupons, gift cards, your grocery and to-do lists, library cards, bank deposit slips, and receipts so you always have them when you need them.

PAPER OR PLASTIC?

Maybe you prefer a paper calendar to keep track of events (forget the BlackBerry—you like the look and feel of good paper) or perhaps you're more comfortable with an electronic system (you love to be able to make schedule changes at the click of a mouse or by tapping on a PDA). But there's a third option that might work even better: using both a paper and an electronic organizing system. You can use a paper family calendar, for example, to keep track of your family's activities and a personal, computer-based system for your business and personal appointments and for communication.

The family calendar records events that affect your family's time—everything from birthday parties to out-of-town business travel. Post the calendar in a central location, such as behind a low kitchen cabinet door or in the mud room, so everyone can use and check it easily.

You can use an electronic calendar to record your business and personal appointments—those that happen before you get home from work or your kids get home from day care or school—and those that not everyone in the household needs to know about, like that secret day-spa visit!

Hidden home hazards

If you have these products around the house, watch out!

DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME! Many seemingly harmless products like this yellow tape, balloons, and even window blinds can be dangerous to a child.

In recent years, millions of baby and children's products—everything from cribs and play yards to toy train cars and bicycle trailers—have been recalled. But what's even more alarming is that some of these recalled products may still be on the market or show up at tag sales, and many products that haven't been recalled continue to injure and even kill children. The Consumer Product Safety Commission has warned about some of these dangerous products for years. New products can also pose hazards. To make your home a safety zone, be on the lookout for these hidden dangers.

WINDOW-BLIND CORDS Children

can get caught up and strangled in the cords of blinds or draperies, which can form a loop. Window cords kill an average of 12 children annually in the U.S.

Safety strategy If you have small children, use cordless blinds or cut looped cords in half to form two strings. You can also roll cords up and tie them with rubber bands or twist ties or mount a cleat high out of your child's reach to secure the excess cord. Also watch out for windows, which can be a hazard if they're left open at your child's level. Window screens aren't strong enough to stop a child from falling out, so install window guards if you live in a high-rise, or in a house with a second or third story that has windows low enough for a child to reach. Buy window locks or guards from a hardware or home-supply store and install them according to the manufacturer's instructions.

BALLOONS If you can't imagine throwing

a party without balloons, make sure children and pets don't play with uninflated or popped ones. They're the leading cause of suffocation—more than 110 children have died in balloon-related incidents over the past three decades. Kids can inhale balloons as they try to blow them up, or choke if they put pieces of popped balloons in their mouths. Balloons can be deadly because they conform to the shape of the airway, making them difficult (sometimes impossible) to dislodge. And they can easily go in farther as a child inhales.

Safety strategy Put packages of unused balloons out of reach of kids, and pick up and throw away popped balloons immediately. Better yet, get helium-filled Mylar balloons for your child's next party.

BABY: STEVEN PUETZER/GETTY IMAGES; BLINDS: DAVIDCOOPER/PHOTONICA/GETTYIMAGES; BALLOONS: STEVE GORTON/DORLING KINDERSLEY/GETTYIMAGES

TOYS WITH SMALL MAGNETS

Eight million magnetic toys have been recalled since 2005, including the popular Magnetix building sets sold at Wal-Mart, Target, Toys "R" Us, and othel'm sr toy and crafts stores nationwide. That's a lot, but you can probably still find plenty of toys on store shelves with magnets that could come loose and fall out of the products. Small magnets are not only a choking hazard but can also be inhaled directly into the lungs; it requires surgery to remove them. And they can be strong enough to attract through body parts. If a small child swallows two magnets, they can stick to each other through intestinal walls and twist or pinch the intestine, causing holes, blockages, infection, or even blood poisoning. The death of a 20-month-old boy and more than 200 injuries involving small magnets have been reported, and at least 19 serious injuries required surgery.

Safety strategy Regardless of your child's age, don't buy toys with small magnets, even if they seem safely contained within the toy. If the toy breaks and the magnets fall out, they could be accidentally swallowed. If you already have toys with magnets and they get loose or dislodged, take them away from your child immediately. Search for missing magnets to determine if your child has ingested one. If you think your child might have, call a doctor.

DANGEROUS ATTRACTION
The magnets in Magnetix toys like these can be swallowed and cause internal injuries.

POOL AND SPA DRAINS

The suction from a pool, hot tub, or spa drain outlet is powerful enough to hold an adult underwater. But most of the victims of pool and spa suction injuries are children. Fifteen injuries and two fatalities involving pool and spa drains occurred between 2002 and 2004, according to the most recent government statistics. Kids and adults can become entrapped when hair, jewelry, or swimming-suit straps get tangled in the outlet cover, or limbs or other body parts get sucked into the drain.

Safety strategy If your pool or spa has flat drain covers, replace them with anti-entrapment drain covers that meet the latest industry safety standard. To determine if a product meets that standard, look for this code: ANSI/ASME A112.19.8-2007. Also, be sure to install an approved ANSI/ASME A112.19.17 Safety Vacuum Release System, which detects drain-outlet blockage and automatically shuts off the pump or interrupts water circulation to prevent entrapment.

If you are building a pool or spa, make sure your design has an approved Safety Vacuum Release System and two drain outlets with approved anti-entrapment drain covers. (The system works like this: If one outlet gets clogged, suction automatically switches to the second outlet.) Or build a pool or spa with a nondrain outlet circulation system. Be sure to find out before you start building what the specific requirements are for pool and spa safety in your community.

FURNITURE TIP-OVER RISK

Toppling furniture, such as a dresser with drawers your child decides to use as a step stool, can cause broken bones, bruising, and death. In an average year, 22 people, usually children younger than 5, are killed and an estimated 3,000 are hurt when household furniture, TVs, or free-standing ranges tip onto them. To prevent tip-overs, buy furniture straps. They secure a dresser, armoire, or bookcase to the wall to keep it from falling. If installed properly, furniture straps are effective protection for toddlers up to about age 4. Our testers recommend the Parent Units Heavy Duty Topple Stop Furniture Fastening System, $17.95 for two. Place your TV and DVD player on sturdy furniture that's the right size, or on a low-rise base, or make sure the electronics are stable and secured to a wall-mounted stand or on a shelf fastened to the wall. Push the TV as far back as possible from the front of the stand or shelf. And remove toys, remote controls, and other items from the top of the TV.

DRAIN: ISTOCKPHOTO/CARMEN MARTÍNEZ BANÚS

NOT CHILD'S PLAY
This walker was recalled two years ago because it wasn't designed to stop at the top of stairs.

SLEEP POSITIONERS These

devices, made of foam or memory foam, are meant to keep infants in a secure sleeping position. But anything cushy in a crib can be a suffocation hazard because soft materials can block airways, no matter what store displays claim.

Safety strategy Keep your baby's crib bare. The safest crib has a firm mattress, a snug-fitting mattress pad, and a fitted crib sheet—and nothing else, not even a blanket. To keep your baby warm, use a footed sleeper or a wearable blanket, and then put him on his back to sleep.

DOORWAY JUMPERS AND WALKERS Bouncing around in a doorway jumper—a bouncy seat that hangs from the top of a door frame so babies can jiggle themselves up and down when they push off the floor—is fun for babies. But a jumper's straps or clamps can break and children can fall. In a poorly designed jumper, babies can bump into the sides of the door frame, either because jumping causes them to bob around or because a sibling tries to swing them. Traditional walkers, which consist of a molded plastic or metal frame with a suspended center seat and wheels attached to the base, may not be safe either, even those that meet current safety standards. They can fall off decks or patios and into swimming pools, or turn over if their wheels get snagged. The American Academy of Pediatrics urges parents not to use traditional baby walkers.

Safety strategy Instead of a doorway jumper or a walker, buy a stationary activity center, an all-in-one, molded-plastic play station that resembles a walker but has no wheels. It's a safer form of exercise because your baby can jump around in the center's suspended seat without the danger of careening around the room or rolling into trouble. Look for one with a thick, solid frame, no sharp edges or sharp hardware underneath or on top, and soft fabric edging on the sides and legs of the seat cushions.

RECALLED PRODUCTS In 2007, the CPSC issued 472 recalls. It's up to retailers to get those products off store shelves, but once they're in your home, it's up to you to keep them away from your family.

Safety strategy Check *www.recalls.gov* to see if any items in your home or on your list of things to buy have been recalled. Or sign up for free e-mail alerts at *www.cpsc.gov/cpsclist.aspx*. Fill out and mail in product registration cards when you buy something new so you will be notified directly by the manufacturer if the item is recalled.

BABY STEPS

Shopping tips from Sandra Gordon, baby pro and author of "Consumer Reports Best Baby Products"

WHEN BUYING ...

... a crib, keep it simple. The safest cribs have straight lines and little decorative detail. Infants can strangle on fancy features such as scrollwork and finials if their clothing gets caught in them. Keeping it simple can also save you money.

... a changing table, try a dresser. If you're tight on space or budget, a properly equipped, sturdy dresser can work as well as a changing table. Buy a contoured changing pad with a safety strap and affix it to the dresser top, according to the manufacturer's directions. Test the height in the store, as if you were changing a baby. To avoid back strain, make sure you don't have to bend too low to get the job done.

... a rocking chair, go for a glider. Gliders are sometimes more comfortable and you'll use one more than you'd think. Plus they dominate the market, so you'll have plenty to choose from. Look for solid wood construction, a smooth gliding mechanism that locks, cushions that are covered in woven fabrics that won't fray, a high padded back for support, padded arms, dense-foam seat cushions, and springs underneath the seat for support.

... any baby furniture, consider convertibles. A crib that converts to a toddler bed or a changing table that changes into a desk can help you go the distance when your baby moves onto the big-boy or big-girl stage, so the room won't need a design overhaul. Your toddler may have an easier time making the transition too, since the switch from, say, a crib to a toddler bed isn't as dramatic with convertible furniture.

SLEEP POSTIONER:PHOTODANAHOFF/JUPITERIMAGES

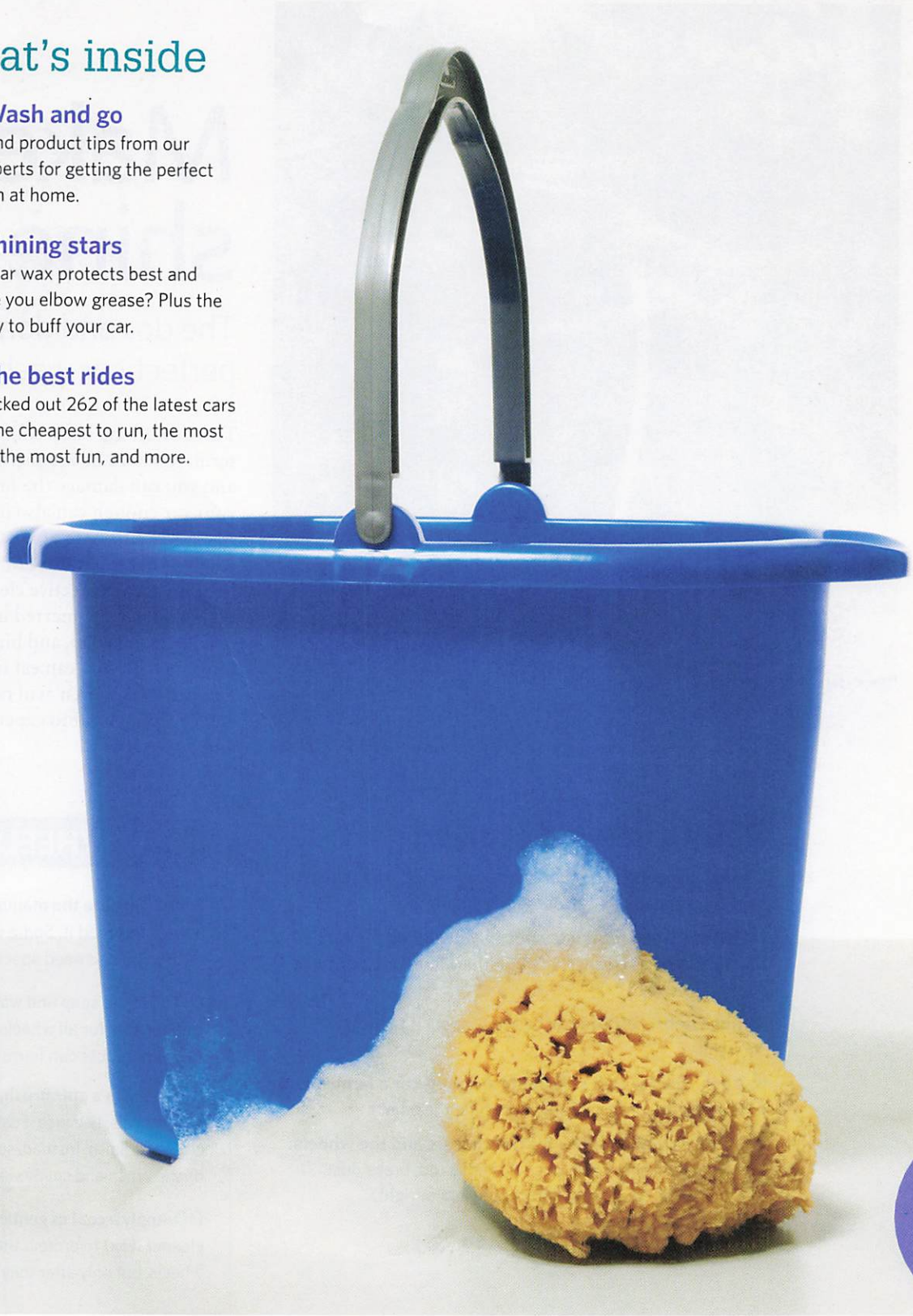
cars

what's inside

92 **Wash and go**
Tricks and product tips from our auto experts for getting the perfect car wash at home.

93 **Shining stars**
Which car wax protects best and will save you elbow grease? Plus the best way to buff your car.

94 **The best rides**
We checked out 262 of the latest cars to find the cheapest to run, the most reliable, the most fun, and more.



WENDELL WEBBER; PROP STYLIST: JEFFSTYLES.COM

HOSING OFF
Scrub and rinse one section at a time.

Make it shine

The dos and don'ts of a perfect car wash at home

There's nothing like a shiny, clean car, but scrub too hard or use the wrong products and you can damage the finish. Not washing your car enough can also hurt the paint job. All cars need a bath at least once a month, whether they look dirty or not. That's because even protective clearcoats over a car's paint can be marred under assault from dead bugs, tree sap, and bird droppings (left long enough, poo can eat into the finish), tar, grease, and even acid rain. Here's some advice from our auto experts on what to use and how to use it.

Before you get started

Like good lingerie and other hand-washables, cars require mild soap and gentle handling. So be sure to:

- **Use car-wash products specially designed for car finishes.** A glass cleaner is OK for the windshield but could strip off car wax.
- **Rinse debris off the car** before soaping it to avoid scratches.
- **Apply suds with a soft, natural sponge or a lambswool mitt.** You can scrub without scratching the paint.
- **Use different sponges for the chassis and the wheels.** The wheel sponge could be gritty with sand, brake dust, or other paint-scratching debris (see box at right).

THE WHEELS

DON'T ignore the manual. It may be boring, but read it. Some rims have delicate clearcoats and need special care.

DO use mild soap and water or a wheel cleaner safe for all wheels. Petroleum-based products can harm your tires.

DON'T use a stiff brush, even if you have alloy wheels, because it can damage their clearcoat finish. Instead, scrub with a soft-bristle brush and soapy water.

DO Apply a coat of gentle wax (not a cleaner wax) to protect the finish of the wheels, but only after they're clean and dry.

DIGITAL VISION PHOTOGRAPHY/VEER

WHAT ABOUT WAXING?

The good news is that our tests show cheap waxes often work better than expensive ones. And it turns out that paste waxes can be as easy to use as liquid ones, contrary to popular opinion. Here are the best waxes for your car:

For older cars
Black Magic Wet Shine Liquid Wax or **Turtle Wax Carnauba Car Wax.** They'll help lift embedded grime.

For rush jobs
Eagle One Wax-As-U-Dry. But know that the shine won't last very long.

For new cars
Turtle Wax 1-Step Wax & Dry. It's easy and all you need when the finish is new.

TIP Apply wax with the product's applicator, soft cotton rags, or a microfiber towel. And remember to let the wax dry fully before buffing.

THE BODY

DON'T wash your car when it's hot from sitting in the sun or from the motor running. Heat can soften paint, making it vulnerable to scratches. Heat also makes the soap and water dry too quickly, leaving spots.

DO give the car a starter shower to loosen any sticky or abrasive stuff.

DO start at the top and work your way around the vehicle.

DON'T sponge in circles, which can leave visible swirl marks. Instead, scrub from front to back.

DON'T let the sponge dry out. Work up a good lather and rinse the sponge often so it won't get dry and rough and damage the finish.

DO finish one section before moving on to avoid dried-suds syndrome.

DO rinse twice using a hose without a nozzle and letting the water flow from top to bottom; the sheeting action minimizes pooling.

DON'T let the car air-dry, which can leave watermarks. Buff with a chamois or a soft microfiber towel.

Getting out the scratches

If your car has annoying swirls and light scratches, try a liquid scratch remover like Quixx High Performance, $19.95, which erased fine to medium scratches in our tests, or Mothers California Gold Scratch Remover, $5, which worked well on fine scratches. (For deep scratches you can feel with your fingernail, call in a pro.) Two tips:

- **Work in the shade.** Sun and heat can dry these products before they work and also make them harder to remove.
- **Use a soft cloth.** Cotton microfiber is best; anything with seams or nylon threads could damage the acrylic finish.

Jennifer Stockburger, ShopSmart auto expert

try THIS! **Mr. Clean AutoDry,** $25, a detergent-filled spray gun, attaches to a garden hose and has a built-in filter that eliminates water spots so there's less need to towel off the car.

The car awards

Here are our picks and pans from this year's crop of new vehicles

The experts at our auto test track checked out 262 models, gauging gas mileage, safety, and handling, and our survey team looked at owner satisfaction and reliability. They even calculated the true cost of ownership, so you can get a handle on the real price of owning a vehicle, including insurance, gas, depreciation, and repairs. Here are some of the highlights—and lowlights—of the year.

biggest surprise

For the first time, two Hyundais are good enough to be among our top picks. These models are tops in performance, reliability, and safety, and our testers loved driving them: **Elantra SE,** $18,000, and **Santa Fe**, $30,700.

Most fun to drive
Mazda MX-5 Miata, $27,000

Most overlooked car (It's not a top seller, but it's a good value based on our tests.) **Mazda5**, $23,000

Most likely to be trouble-free (In the manual version, it's also the cheapest we tested.) **Toyota Yaris hatchback**, $12,600

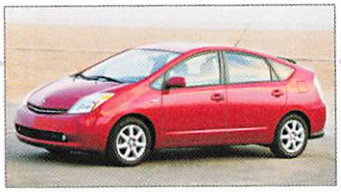
Most likely to give you headaches **Pontiac Solstice**, $26,000

Most reliable brand overall
Honda

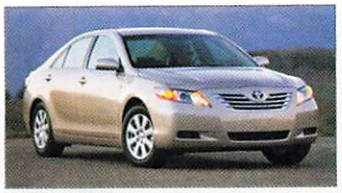
Least reliable brand overall
Land Rover

best under $25,000

Honda Accord (four-cylinder), $22,800



Small car with the best gas mileage **Toyota Prius (base) hybrid,** $24,000, 44 mpg*



Midsized sedan with the best gas mileage
Toyota Camry Hybrid, $30,000, 34 mpg*

SUV with the best gas mileage **Toyota Highlander Hybrid,** $44,000, 24 mpg*

Biggest gas guzzler
Lincoln Navigator Ultimate SUV, $59,000, 13 mpg*

* Overall gas mileage based on our real-world fuel-economy tests.

MOST EXPENSIVE CAR TO OWN

Mercedes-Benz SL550, $110,500 over five years

CHEAPEST CAR TO OWN

Toyota Yaris hatchback with manual transmission, $23,250 over five years

Note: These ownership costs are based on the car models we tested. Our estimates include depreciation, gas, interest, insurance, maintenance and repairs, and taxes over five years.

Did you buy it? The latest safety news you should know about

TOASTERS 482,000 Hamilton Beach and Proctor-Silex toasters sold from August 2007 through February 2008

PROBLEM The toasters can stay on after the toast has popped up, creating a fire hazard.

IF YOU OWN ONE Go to *www.proctorsilex.com* to see if your toaster has been recalled. If it has, stop using it and call Hamilton Beach at (800) 574-6800 for a free replacement.

TOYS 22,000 Play Wonder Toy Sundae Sets sold at Target from December 2006 through December 2007

PROBLEM The wooden cherries on top of the sundae pose a choking hazard.

IF YOU OWN ONE Return it to any Target store for a full refund. For information, call the manufacturer, Battat, at (800) 247-6144.

CANDLEHOLDERS 18,000 Silver Square Tealight Candle Holders #2174941 sold at Pier 1 from June through December 2007

PROBLEM The holder can heat up, causing the candles to burn faster, with a higher flame than normal, posing a fire hazard.

IF YOU OWN ONE Stop using it and return it to any Pier 1 store for a refund or store credit. For information, call (800) 245-4595 or go to *www.pier1.com*.

FRYERS 27,000 Cooks Deep Fryers sold at JCPenney from August 2007 through January 2008

PROBLEM A faulty heating element can cause the fryer to overheat, posing a fire and burn hazard.

IF YOU OWN ONE Stop using the fryer immediately and return it to JCPenney for a full refund. For information, call (888) 333-6063 or go to *www.jcp.com*.

PUZZLE About 200,00 Puzzle Track Play sets, also called Battery Operated Puzzle Vehicle sets, sold on QVC, item # T16876, from September 2002 through December 2007

PROBLEM The paint on puzzle pieces contains excessive levels of lead.

IF YOU OWN ONE Return it to QVC for a full refund. For info, call (800) 367-9444 or go to *www.qvc.com*.

BLIND ZONES THAT KILL

An average of two children a week are killed in back-over accidents like the one that took the life of Cameron Gulbransen in 2002. Cameron was 2 years old when his father accidentally backed over him in the family's SUV in Oyster Bay, N.Y. A blind spot had made it impossible for Gulbransen to see his son behind the car.

The good news is that the president recently signed into law the Cameron Gulbransen Kids Transportation Safety Act, which sets new car-safety standards aimed at preventing children from being struck by a vehicle because of a blind zone. The bill also directs the Department of Transportation to consider toughening standards to prevent power-window accidents. In addition, a child-safety information program will be established to inform parents of the hazards posed to children by vehicles.

If you don't have a backup camera, make a habit of walking all the way around your vehicle before backing up. Better yet, consider installing a backup camera, especially if you drive a large vehicle such as an SUV. We like the **Visor-View V-V-VCLP2, $389.**

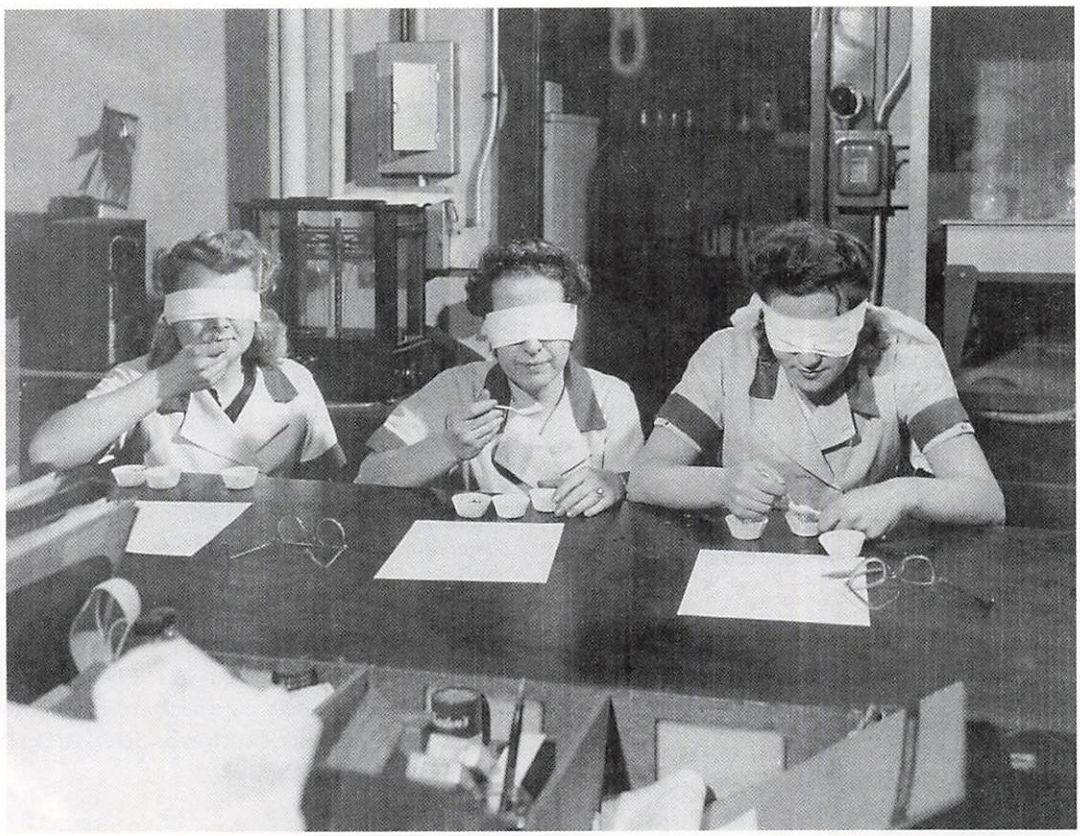
IT'S OUTRAGEOUS!

Your Social Security number is no secret

THE ISSUE More than 8 million Americans have their identity stolen every year thanks to thieves accessing account numbers. That's 15 people every minute.

WHAT WE THINK Right now, chances are good that your Social Security number can be found online and in public records. We think the government should restrict the sale, purchase, and display of these numbers to reduce identity theft. Also, we support legislation that would make it faster and easier to put a "security freeze" on your credit reports so you can stop thieves from fraudulently opening new accounts.

WHAT YOU CAN DO If you have an identity theft tale, we want to hear it. Go to *www.ConsumersUnion.org* to share your story and to learn more about how you can take action.



Masked marvels

If you think blue-corn tortilla chips taste better than red or yellow ones, you should spend a day with our blindfolded taste testers. Without the visuals, testers can't be biased by color or appearance. (Yes, your brain can trick you into thinking orange tastes like orange and yellow tastes like lemon.) In the picture above, taken in 1945, testers were sampling instant gelatin desserts. The results: Testers couldn't tell the difference between Jell-O flavors. So what about those multicolored tortilla chips? In a recent test, tasters couldn't tell the difference between them either. One thing that has changed: Plain white cloth blindfolds have been given the heave-ho. We don't use masks much these days, but when they're needed, our tasters glam it up in blue satin (above, left).

SHOPSMART;) take-out tips

SUMMER ENTERTAINING

Grilled corn on the cob (Serves 6 to 8)

6 to 8 ears of corn in their husk

Allow grill to heat to medium high for 10 minutes with the lid closed. Meanwhile, peel off the first few layers of the husk, leaving a few layers to protect the corn. Be sure that none of the silk is exposed or it could catch fire. Place corn on heated grill and turn every 3 to 5 minutes for 15 minutes. Remove from heat and serve immediately or keep warm.

Lime- and tequila-marinated flank steak (Serves 6 to 8)

- **3 lb. flank steak**
- **¼ cup rice vinegar**
- **¼ cup tequila**
- **⅔ cup fresh lime juice (about 3 to 4 medium to large limes)**
- **⅔ cup olive oil**
- **1 tablespoon chopped garlic**
- **Salt and pepper to taste**

Place steak in a deep dish. Mix vinegar, tequila, lime juice, olive oil, garlic, and salt and pepper in a small bowl and pour over steak. Cover and refrigerate for several hours, turning occasionally. Preheat grill on medium for 10 minutes with the lid closed. Cook steak 4 minutes a side. (**TIP** Cook about 2 minutes, rotate a quarter turn, and cook 2 more minutes.) Flip and repeat until done. Using a thermometer, make sure the meat registers 145° F for medium rare and 160° F for medium internal temps. Brush with marinade after each turn except the last. Wait 5 to 7 minutes before serving. Cut into thin slices across the grain for tenderness.

TOP PINOT GRIGIOS

Perfect whites for a summer seafood menu

1. **Clos du Bois 2007,** California, $14
2. **Yellow Tail 2007,** Australia, $8
3. **San Angelo 2006,** Italy, $18
4. **Robert Mondavi Private Selection 2006,** California, $11
5. **Montevina 2006,** California, $10
6. **Willamette Valley Vineyards 2006,** Oregon, $15
7. **King Estate Signature Collection 2006,** Oregon, $16
8. **Talus Collection 2006,** California, $8

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GRILL AND STEAK: JAMES BAIGRIE; FOOD STYLIST: MICHAEL PEDERSON; PROP STYLIST: LYNDA WHITE

Grilled summer fruit (Serves 6 to 8)

1 pineapple or 3 to 4 medium peaches
Vanilla ice cream
Strawberries, raspberries, or blueberries

Peel and core pineapple and cut into 1-inch slices. If using peaches, cut them in half and remove pits but don't peel.

On a medium-hot grill, cook peaches skin-side up for 4 minutes, then turn over and finish grilling 3 to 4 minutes. Cook pineapple for 2 minutes per side. Serve with vanilla ice cream and fresh berries.

Grilled vegetable skewers with garlic and fennel (Serves 6 to 8)

- **2 to 3 summer squash or zucchini**
- **2 to 3 small to medium eggplants**
- **1 pint small cherry tomatoes**
- **1 pint small white mushrooms, stems removed**
- **6 to 8 long metal skewers**

MARINADE

- **¼ cup soy sauce**
- **¼ cup lemon juice**
- **⅔ cup olive oil**
- **1 tablespoon chopped garlic**
- **½ teaspoon fennel seed**
- **Salt and pepper to taste**

Cut vegetables into ½-inch cubes (leave cherry tomatoes and mushroom caps whole) and thread on the metal skewers, alternating the colors. Use two pieces of each veggie per skewer. Arrange skewers in one layer in a dish with sides. Meanwhile, combine the remaining ingredients in a bowl; mix well and pour over veggies. Marinate for no more than 15 to 20 minutes. Place skewers on a medium-hot grill and close the lid. Cook 2 minutes per side. Cook approximately 1 minute, then rotate a quarter turn and cook 1 minute more. Turn and repeat until done. Brush with marinade after each turn.

Click here for party help

Next time you're planning a shindig, check out these sites for help with invitations, planning menus, finding fun party supplies, and more.

For invitations invitationconsultants.com

For party-giving advice monkeysee.com

For kiddie birthdays birthdayinabox.com

For general party support party411.com

BEST FAST-FOOD PICKS If you're on the go, try one of these to save on fat and calories:

AU BON PAIN
- Riviera Salad
- Spicy Tuna Sandwich

BOSTON MARKET
- Roasted Turkey
- Roasted Sirloin

BURGER KING
- Whopper Jr., no mayo
- Tendergrill Chicken Garden Salad, light Italian dressing

DOMINO'S PIZZA
- Crunchy Thin-Crust Pizza, 2 slices from a 12-inch pie and 2 or 3 veggie toppings
- Grilled Chicken Caesar with light Italian dressing

KFC
- Oven-Roasted Twister Sandwich with no sauce
- Original Recipe Chicken Breast, no breading

MCDONALD'S
- Filet-o-Fish
- Asian Salad, grilled chicken, low-fat balsamic vinaigrette

PIZZA HUT
- Fit n' Delicious Pizza, 12-inch, green pepper, red onion, diced tomato, 2 slices
- Spaghetti with marinara sauce

RANCH *1
- Chicken Tenders, all white meat
- Ranch Classic

SUBWAY
- Sweet Onion Chicken Teriyaki, 6-inch
- Veggie Delight, 6-inch

TACO BELL
- Fresco Steak Burrito Supreme
- Fresco Bean Burrito

UNO CHICAGO GRILL
- House Salad with grilled chicken
- Grilled Chicken with Mango Salsa

WENDY'S
- Small chili
- Jr. hamburger

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PEACHES: JAMES BAIGRIE; FOOD STYLIST: MICHAEL PEDERSON; PROP STYLIST: LYNDA WHITE; FAST FOOD: LAURA JOHANSEN; FOOD STYLIST LISA HOMA

shoppingdetails

Where to find some of the things you've seen in this issue

COVER
Shirt *www.oldnavy.com*
Coin purse *www.fieldofroses.etsy.com*

FASHION PANEL p. 15
Bangle *www.alexisbittar.com*
Dress and cardigan *www.tracyreese.com*
Shirt/tank *www.karenmillen.co.uk*

ALL FIRED UP p. 27
Pakka wood-handled grill tool set *www.crateandbarrel.com*
Pineapple double skewers *www.williams-sonoma.com*
Taylor instant-read thermometer *www.williams-sonoma.com*

KEEP IT FRESH! p. 45
Oil bottle *www.surlatable.com*
Spice containers *www.crateandbarrel.com*
Canisters *www.williams-sonoma.com*

MOTION SICKNESS p. 61
Pill container *www.containerstore.com*

FAMILY OPENER p. 85
Alarm clock *www.target.com*

NOTE: None of the clothing or products mentioned above has been tested by our labs.

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FOOD LABEL ALERT!
Don't fall for these supermarket rip-offs
THE PERFECT BRA p. 22
HEALTHY HAIR p. 20
THE BEST FROM OUR TESTS appliances, electronics & more
EASY TREATS p. 18
Great sites for freebies

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